

CREEPING INTO THE CONVERSATION
TRACING HIP HOP LITERATURE
FROM MARGIN TO CENTER

by

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ABSTRACT

In “Creeping into the Conversation,” I examine canonical texts from the African American Literary Tradition, including Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), alongside contemporary, oft marginalized novels, including Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1997), and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999). This project considers literal and figurative streets as historical markers of class, race, and socio-economic status, but also as a link between literary periods. Placing canonical literature in the same conversations as “street literature” and Hip Hop literature is a way to diversify critical conversations in contemporary African American literature. Embracing street literature and Hip Hop literature as parts of a larger critical conversation provides a lens through which one can examine the cultural, racial, and political impacts they have in popular culture and in academia. “Creeping into the Conversation” is an intertextual study which showcases diverse conversations among texts across a large trajectory of African American literature. These diverse conversations give fresh insight to texts already considered mainstays in African American literature. Additionally, these intertextual analyses bring more contemporary narratives and authors into academic discourses. On the whole, “Creeping into the Conversation” bridges the gap between the critical and the literary in contemporary African American literature.

DEDICATION

For Linda, my mother, prayer warrior, and first role model; for all of the Luties, Edens, Pecolas, Preciouses, Winters, and Porsches; For Rekia Boyd, Aiyanna Stanley-Jones, Tanisha Anderson, Sandra Bland, and countless others; and, for black girls and women everywhere. You matter. Black Women Matter.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION “THE BLUEPRINT”

“To a new era of understanding and action, rooted in honest, open, and sometimes painful talk between people.”—Sister Souljah, *No Disrespect* (1994)

In the early ‘90s, Sister Souljah burst onto the Hip Hop scene as the only female member of Rap group Public Enemy with a message for the people. That message was one of political, social, and racial importance. No matter how painful, harsh, and taboo the talk was, Souljah understood that if African American people were to progress in any substantial way, there must be a new era that made room for honest and painful talk between people. Souljah’s ability to connect to the audience with her brash and unapologetic language was both jarring and indicative of Hip Hop culture. Souljah had a message in the early ‘90s and she continued that message well after her Rap career ended. Souljah’s memoir, *No Disrespect* (1994), chronicles the key moments in her life in which she experiences an overlap of political and social awareness in conjunction with a need for a creative outlet. In 1994, and later in 1999, those components would meet in the most perfect way possible. Souljah could not have prophesied the cultural impact her voice would have in popular culture and in the formation of a new genre of literature.

Souljah’s message of ushering in a new era that forces painful talk as a way toward understanding and action is also applicable to literary study and cultural theory. Much of the painful talk surrounding marginalized literature deals heavily with the painful talk of relationships, sexuality, racism, and gender issues. For example, in 1999, Souljah published a novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. In the sixteen years since its publication, few literary and

cultural scholars have addressed the text, or if they do, they deem it either a low art form of fiction or as the best of the worst of street literature. However, as Souljah suggests, sometimes ignoring texts that deal in painful or taboo talk is to dismiss representations of African American lived experiences. This is especially the case when we talk about or do not talk about issues concerning women and girls. Following is a literary study that makes prominent a body of marginalized literature, texts like Souljah's novel, that have been relegated to the status of "street" or "Hip Hop" fiction. In this dissertation, I present an intertextual reading that places those texts alongside canonical African American literature, specifically the novels of Toni Morrison and Ann Petry. In doing so, I emphasize the literary merit of those oft-ignored Hip Hop fictions.

The value of an intertextual approach is two-fold. First, it brings texts together from different decades, offering new perspectives on canonical and non-canonical works alike. Conducting these kinds of intertextual analyses reveals diverse ways of critically engaging canonical texts, while also showing how to engage contemporary works, like Souljah's, in new modes of thinking. Second, an intertextual reading illustrates how two groups of texts (one deemed high literary effort, the other low) do similar work in representing the lived experiences of African American women.

Terms and Definitions

One of the goals of this project is to challenge how literary scholars think about literature in relation to fiction. Some of academia may understand literature to be written representations of language in the form of prose, poetry, and novels. For some literature refers to classics and other works, fiction and non-fiction, deemed acceptable in both language and content. As such some scholars may consider fiction to be a lower form of art that has no theme or message, but is

fictitious. In this project, I understand “literature” as a work, whether fiction or non-fiction, that incorporates literary devices (i.e., figurative language) while also pushing readers toward some new understanding about a society’s historical, political, or social moment. Terry Eagleton informs my understanding of literature. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Eagleton suggests that literature can be defined in a number of ways that illuminate the complexities of the term. Eagleton says, “The idea that there is a single ‘normal’ language, a common currency shared equally by all members of society, is an illusion. Any actual language consists of a highly complex range of discourses, differentiated according to class, region, gender, status and so on, which can by no means be neatly unified into a single homogenous linguistic community” (4). As Eagleton notes, there are a number of works and periods, across varying classes and regions that make up literature. It is this understanding of what literature can be that informs how I define literature. This is especially true in the way I read street literature critically in this project. Whereas some critics would consider street literature a low art form of fiction, Eagleton asks the question: “if literature is ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ writing does this imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative and unimaginative?” (2). Literature also includes those works in which there are historical, artistic, and political value in a society. By contrast, I define fiction as Eagleton does; it means writing that is not literally true. This distinction matters because labeling a work as purely fiction does not suggest that it has a political, historical, or social value. The connotation here is that this is a work that is purely artistic in nature. There is a key difference in how these terms are used as ways of classifying and separating written works. In contemporary literature, there is an underlying presumption that if a work, whether novel, poem, or otherwise, is labeled fiction, particularly if the author is African American, then it is automatically considered a low art form and is not of the same caliber as traditionally held

literatures.¹ What results is a separation of works that leaves one group on the outside of academic discourse.

For the purpose of this project, canonical refers to the collection of works that are considered acceptable representation of African American literature. Canonical works would be frequent components of a standard survey course in African American literature. These texts would also appear in anthologized readers for African American literature. If one were to ask for representative texts on any major period, the canon would refer to a collective of works that represents a particular genre. In this project, I focus specifically on African American women writers across several literary periods to show a range of literature that culminates in a genre I call Hip Hop feminist literature.

Hip Hop literature refers to texts written during the Hip Hop era and about the Hip Hop era. The stories are set between the 1970s and today. Specifically, Hip Hop literature can be characterized as:

1. The works are often raw, reflecting Hip Hop culture. This includes, but is not limited to texts that portray street violence, the crack/cocaine drug epidemic, Hip Hop music, and incarceration rates among people of color.
2. Characters face issues as a result of Hip Hop culture that dramatically impact that characters' development; these difficulties are largely indicative of persistent issues which manifest during the period demarcated as the Hip Hop era.

¹ In Chapter 4, I discuss Daniel Grassian's *Writing the Future of Black America* and his take on what the writing of Black America looks like. He has a very specific group of acceptable street literature authors. Sister Souljah is not included in this list, but Grassian makes clear that Souljah's and Sapphire's works are the best of the worst.

3. Hip Hop is thematically infused in the majority of the narrative in such a way as to influence the mood, tone, language, conflicts, and other literary elements of the narrative.

Within the genre of Hip Hop literature, I identify the subgenre of Hip Hop Feminist literature. This subgenre uses as a foundation Hip Hop Feminism and 1) analyzes the sexual politics that surround the African American, female form; 2) taps into a culturally relevant Hip Hop culture, which directly correlates to the everyday experiences of minority, ethnic women; and 3) explores similar narratives of other under-represented groups born out during the Hip Hop generation.

In identifying and explicating this subgenre of Hip Hop Feminist literature, I rely on several terms related to the developments of Black feminism and Black literary theory. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to Black feminism as the theorizing and organizing of Black feminists and movement women. It pays particular attention to how racism, classism, and sexism are linked. The collective way of thinking about the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect is called intersectionality.²

Hip Hop feminism in this project refers to young feminists born in the late 1960s and after who have a keen awareness of Black feminism, yet they have an eye toward Hip Hop culture and the ways in which women are affected in the Hip Hop generation. Joan Morgan coins this term with the debut of her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (1999). My project will help bridge the gap between “street literature” and canonical “classics” in the African American literary tradition. The intent of this project is to reveal a new subgenre of literature that has been ignored because academics sometimes tend to

² Kimberle Crenshaw coins this term. Later, I talk specifically about how I employ this framework in this study.

disregard literature that is deemed “street.” So, while a move away from using labels like “urban” and “ethnic” may help to prevent more marginalization, I argue that texts labeled as such can still have literary merit.³

The Way Forward

In conversation with the work of forward thinking scholars in the fields of Black feminism and Hip-Hop feminism, this project serves as an overall attempt to broaden the conversation around how scholars critically engage street literature. I argue that there are stories and narratives that provide important perspectives on African American women’s lives that have been excluded from academic literary discourses because they mirror Hip Hop culture. Since many of these texts contain vulgar language and other risqué content, they oftentimes carry negative connotations with labels like “urban,” “street,” and “ethnic.” African American street literature authors frequently feel the backlash from such labels, and their works’ literary, cultural, and critical values are diminished. Hence, the major objectives of this project are to a) highlight how marginalized literatures contribute to both literary and critical conversations within the same space as traditional mainstays in the African American literary tradition, b) explicate how the progression in critical and literary theory leads to Hip Hop literature as an ever-expanding genre of contemporary African American literature, and c) demonstrate how through the linking of the literary and the cultural there emerges a new genre: Hip Hop feminist literature.

I begin in this Introduction by first offering a brief historical overview of Black feminism and its progression into Hip Hop feminism. Then, I discuss critical connections between Black feminist theory and Black literary theory. African American women writers necessitate this

³ While the adjective “street” can have some negative connotations, I do use “street literature,” instead of “street fiction” in order to discuss early forms of street literature which pre-date the emergence of Hip Hop culture and the Hip Hop generation. I also use that term to refer to Sapphire’s *PUSH* because it pre-dates Sister Souljah’s 1999 novel which is largely regarded as the text that cements the genre Hip Hop literature.

connection with their use of literature to confront the social, political, and economic difficulties of their lived experiences. In the final section of this Introduction, I address the literary significance of Hip Hop literature and its sub-genre I call Hip Hop feminist literature. I note in particular the ways in which academics are engaging Hip Hop culture from critical, social, and feminist perspectives but not yet from literary perspectives. Then I discuss the rise of Hip Hop literature and its marginalization. In particular, I emphasize those Hip Hop texts about women and girls of the Hip Hop generation. My aim ultimately is to add a literary perspective to the critical and theoretical conversations already unfolding about Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop feminism. In doing so, I highlight a new subgenre of African American writing, Hip Hop feminist literature.

Critical Developments in Black Feminism and the Rise of Hip Hop Feminism

This study is rooted deeply in the work of previous generations of Black feminist scholarship. Black feminism can be traced back to the 1830s with pioneering women like Maria Stewart speaking out against racism, sexism, and oppression through organizing and the Women's Club Movement.⁴ The Women's Club Movement is the focal point of the first major wave of Black feminism. It saw women organizing and championing for African American women's rights. By the end of this first wave, women were ready to engage in risqué

⁴ See Beverly Guy-Sheftall's anthologies *Still Brave* and *Words of Fire: An Anthology of Black Feminist Thought*. The Women's Club Movement begins in the 1890s with pioneering Black feminists like Ida B. Wells. Wells was a vocal and prominent figure who spoke out against lynching in the United States. Her advocacy against lynching led to other African American women organizers joining together to fight against lynching and other issues affecting African Americans in America. By 1896, African American women had formed several clubs that sparked larger movements of social and political reform. Under Mary Church Terrell's leadership, those clubs merged to form the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. One of the most successful clubs in the South was the Atlanta-based Neighborhood Union. Later, Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women, the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and the Bethune-Cookman Institute. Finally, other pioneering African American women were also instrumental in the formulation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. ("Reforming Their World").

conversations about sex, gender, and African American women's bodies.⁵ Then, Deborah E. McDowell, in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980), challenges Black feminists to expand the theory, to include women of color, and those outside of the United States. Likewise, Hazel Carby's "Woman's Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory" (1987) calls for African American women to examine closely the purpose and function of Black feminism and explore ways to ensure that it remains functional. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins' text *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) places African American women's ideas at the center of analysis. Collins' work privileges African American women's lived experiences. bell hooks encourages white Feminists to investigate the similarities/differences between their standpoints and those of African American women. hooks calls for more diverse perspectives from African American women thinkers, well known and obscure (Collins xi-xiii). Additionally, Collins brings attention to controlling images of African American women in the media and in music and encourages readers to embrace different experiences. She argues that readers can learn from these experiences, even if they are not their own (72-74). Collins also argues that "feminist" does not automatically mean gay or lesbian, and she invites more people to engage in an open dialogue about the aims of Black feminism.

Hip Hop feminists, like the members of "The Crunk Feminist Collective," a group of self-identified feminists born in the Hip Hop generation established in 2010, are in tune with Hip Hop culture and occurrences in society, particularly relevant to ethnic, minority women and other under-represented groups. These feminists are invested in cultural and social critiques of African American, female lived experience, and how those experiences are manifested in everyday society. Since historically there have been literatures documenting different periods of

⁵ Here, the first wave of feminism refers to the period from the early 1800s to the mid-1930s.

the African American experience, the Hip Hop generation also has these works. Though the works are not often at the center of literary and critical conversation, this project points to places where the critical and social overlap. The foundational work has already begun. Fortunately, there are scholars whose work is expanding the body of scholarship on Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop cultural theory.

Morgan is the first in a line of new Black feminist scholars whose focus is primarily on Hip Hop Culture and how it affects women of color. Hip Hop feminists continue to interrogate issues of race, class, and gender and the points in society at which these factors intersect. They also analyze current issues that plague African American women in the larger society. In *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*, Morgan argues that there must be more dialogue about sexist men, “independent women” who insist on men paying the tab, baby mama drama, the shrinkage and decline of nuclear families, and marriage rates among educated African American women.⁶ While Tricia Rose focuses on rap lyrics and their treatment of African American women in her text *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), Morgan’s work focuses less on music, and instead broadens the discussion to include several facets of Hip Hop culture and how those spaces treat African American women and girls.⁷ My work closely aligns with Morgan’s, specifically because she focuses on issues that are prevalent in society and to women in and of the Hip Hop generation.

⁶ Here, I mean that African American women who want to marry African American men are less likely to do so if all of their attention is spent on being so independent, or if they forego a traditional path to marriage and become pregnant out of wedlock. The traditional “nuclear family” (two parent household) has seen a significant decline in the last twenty years.

⁷ Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* is the first of its kind to do intertextual analyses of rap lyrics and the implications those lyrics have for African American women inside and outside of Hip Hop culture. For examples of other studies, see Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk about Hip Hop* (2013), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (2007), and Reiland Rabaka’s *Hip Hop’s Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women’s Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (2012).

These texts change how we view African American female narratives in terms of race, class, and gender in keeping with what Kimberle Crenshaw Williams calls “intersectionality.” Williams’ “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1993) represents a change in how scholars discuss race, class, and gender politics as they concern women of color and minorities. Williams names the intersections of race, class, and gender as a way of organizing, analyzing, and understanding the experiences African American women have with oppression and racism (1242-1244). Black women can never *not* be black. There can be white women who are victims of sexism or who face economic and class restrictions, but they have white privilege to protect them from racism. Likewise, black men have access to male privilege. Only black women and other women of color have experiences at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Williams boldly recognizes this junction and names it “Intersectionality.”

My project uses intersectionality as a lens through which to understand the female characters in the works included in this study and their navigation of urban landscapes across several periods and aesthetics. In order to make a clear case for doing this work, I critically engage Hip Hop literature and Street literature with traditional African American literatures like Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. After establishing these texts’ viability through intertextual analyses, I then focus on a particular author, Sister Souljah, whose texts serve to support the inclusion of Hip Hop literature in critical discourse. *The Coldest Winter Ever* is the first text considered as representative of Hip Hop culture on a large scale, thereby cementing Hip Hop literature as a genre. Moreover, Souljah continues to push and fight her way into the center of conversation with the sequel *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*. By examining the voice of Porsche Santiago and how it serves as a critique of issues

plaguing young, black girls and women in Hip Hop culture, this text can be taken up as Hip Hop Feminist literature, another expansion of critical engagement. Souljah's treatment of Porsche's character is through a critical lens that can also be read as a Hip Hop feminist lens. Thus, it is an example of how Souljah successfully links the growth of Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism to literary analyses that speak to the central issues affecting women of the Hip Hop generation. Contemporary Black feminists, like Rose, have already provided a large volume of scholarship that articulates the relationship between feminism and rap music, the music of Hip Hop culture.

As Hip Hop culture continues to grow, Hip Hop feminists continue the work of expanding the critical and bridging it with the cultural. In "Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip Hop Feminisms" (2007), Whitney Peoples aims to "clearly understand the sociopolitical platform of Hip Hop feminists and how that platform both impacts and figures into the history and future of black American feminist thought" (Peoples 19). What Peoples articulates here is a concerted effort for broadening conversations among Hip Hop feminists that takes into account sociopolitical aspects of Hip Hop generation feminists. The remaining task is shifting these critical conversations to texts which narrate black, female lived experiences in the Hip Hop generation. I argue that these works extend the African American literary tradition by building upon previous discourses and theories that call for more diversity in critical engagement. This diversity creates a bridge between the critical, Hip Hop feminism, and the literary, Hip Hop Feminist literature.

Like Peoples, Hip Hop feminists also consider how Hip Hop culture affects African American womanhood in a public space. Gwendolyn Pough merges both Hip Hop music and Hip Hop feminism, but she turns her attention to how these components manifest in literary

forms. In *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004), Pough initiates a dialogue regarding Hip Hop Feminism and literature. She comments “Hip Hop’s dilemma is staying true to the art form inspired by the youth culture or embracing mass culture and moving on to success outside the culture” (5). Pough examines life stories as they appear both in music and in autobiographical texts such as Souljah’s *No Disrespect* (1996) and Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* as a way of examining how these women use the language of the past and present to construct their identities as African American women and create a rhetoric of “wreck” that claims agency and encourages self-definition not only for themselves but also for contemporary young African American women (106-107). Here, Pough articulates the link between Hip Hop culture and those who write and produce in that Hip Hop environment. While Pough’s literary attentions to Hip Hop culture and the work Hip Hop feminism have begun to do can lead to literary revolution, there is still work to do. What Joan Morgan and others have yet to do is locate a body of “Hip Hop Feminist literature.” This is the most important part of my project. I will locate these texts first, by recovering marginalized literature—those works that have been relegated to the category of “popular fiction” and dismissed by academic communities. I will then show how these texts make critical interventions when read through the lens of Hip Hop Feminism. Then, I explicate how this reclaimed literature lends itself nicely to a new space in academic discourse.

Literary Theory and the Rise of Hip Hop Literature

Since Hip Hop feminists have shown that there is space for literary contributions that lend themselves to Hip Hop feminism, it is important to examine the ways in which this project makes an insertion between the critical and the literary. This intertextual study is a move toward the solidification of Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop feminist literature as viable participants in

academic discourses. It does so in the vein of Barbara Smith and Barbara Christian. First, Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) marked the emergence of African American Women's Literary Theory. In 1977, during the very beginning of Hip Hop culture, Black feminists were already thinking about the future and how the literary is linked to the theoretical. When Smith looks toward a Black feminist criticism, she acknowledges the progressions and developments that have already taken place and how a link exists between Black feminist theory and African American literary theory, but she also looks to ways in which the literary contributions still find themselves confined to narrowed critical spaces. Smith contends that,

. . . the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of Black women's literature. A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black women identified art. . . . I want to make . . . some connections between the politics of Black women's lives, what we write about, our situations as artists. . . . I will look at how Black women have been viewed critically by outsiders, demonstrate the necessity for Black feminist criticism, and try to understand what the existence or nonexistence of Black lesbian writing reveals about the state of Black women's culture and the intensity of all Black women's oppression. (133)

Smith's direct linking of Black feminism and African American literary theory and tradition opens the door for continued progressions in both critical spaces and literary spaces for African American women writers.

Similarly, Barbara Christian, in "The Race for Theory" (1987), acknowledges the academic pursuits of her colleagues and their calls for canonized literary expansions, but she cautions them to rethink the methods by which theories are developed and delivered to their audiences without discounting creative forms. Christian also links social movements that produce literature and literary critics. She argues, "The black arts movement of the 1960s, out of which black studies, the feminist literary movement of the 1970s and women's studies grew,

articulated precisely those issues, which came not from the declarations of the New Western Philosophers but from these groups' reflections on their own lives" (282). Christian articulates a clear pattern of social and political movements and the literatures they produce. For Christian, it has always been clear that critics can create creative written works and also be critical of those art forms. However, the danger in moving forward is becoming too focused on the newest theoretical progressions without linking those theories to the critics who write them and the creative forms they produce.

Christian warns against narrowed definitions of literature that do not always recognize the importance of writers and critics like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker who produce creative forms and who also serve as critical voices of literature. Additionally, Christian warns against narrowed definitions of feminism that exclude the very women they mean to include. Christian argues,

In the race for theory, feminists, eager to enter the halls of power, have attempted their own prescriptions. So often I have read books on feminist literary theory that restrict the definition of what feminism means . . . Seldom do they note these distinctions, because if they did they could not articulate a theory. Often as a way of clearing themselves they do acknowledge that women of color, for example do exist, they go on to do what they were going to do anyway, which is invent a theory that has little relevance for us. (286)

Certainly, Christian's critique of existing literary texts and criticism influenced the selection of texts for this project. Many of the texts have been marginalized inside the academy and given labels such as "street" or "inner-city" fiction. In short, they are peripheral to academic engagement instead of being the center of conversation. Some critics may even declare that these texts are not literature, and thus not worthy of academic scrutiny, even as peripheral texts.

However, these narratives, like those produced within Davis's blues aesthetic, often evoke feelings and express thoughts of contemporary Hip Hop culture.⁸

As Christian informs the literary choices and arguments I make in this project, there are also links to Hip Hop culture and its effect on literature. Hip Hop, which began in the late 1960s but emerged as a strong presence in the early 1970s, continues to permeate contemporary African American culture.⁹ Through dance and cultural expression —art ranging from street graffiti to gallery-featured artists, to film and music—this movement both influences and reflects the consciousness of African Americans since the Nationalist movement of the 1970s.¹⁰ The music of Hip Hop culture, rhythm and poetry, perhaps more so than any other medium, serves as a vehicle and a representation of the life of African Americans who continue to experience marginalization in American culture. Rap music, like its predecessors blues and jazz, provides a vehicle for those who feel invisible, voiceless, and economically disadvantaged by legal, structural inequalities that invisibly edge them out of mainstream American life. Hence, groups like Outkast, a name the members of the group chose in order to reflect the social psychology of young, African Americans, remain popular within African American communities and mature age groups, even as their recording productions and releases decline.

Also like jazz and the blues, Hip Hop culture, specifically its musical element of rap, influences the literature. It is not uncommon in African American culture for literary critics and

⁸ Here, I am referencing Angela Davis' In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998). In this work she links blues legacies to black feminism through the works of prominent blues women.

⁹ Most historians credit the group of spoken word artists, The Last Poets, as the earliest recorded rap artists and the innovators of Hip Hop culture. Extending from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and Black Nationalist Movement of the 1960s, a group of spoken word artists and musicians collaborated in oral performances.

¹⁰ Leopold Senghor suggests in his explication of the Negritude Movement that art for people of African descent is pragmatic and philosophical. Art, while serving practical functions in quotidian life, is also a re-presentation of life as reflected through the artist's vision. (Senghor 27-28).

philosophers simultaneously to serve as music critics.¹¹ During the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes hybridized classical poetical forms by infusing them with the rhythm of both jazz and blues.¹² The ways in which these critics link musical forms to the literary tradition reveal a mutually beneficial relationship between African American music and literature. Critic Adam Mansbach has made important strides in linking the musical histories of Hip Hop music and Rap to critical literary engagement. In his article, “On Lit Pop,” Mansbach states “the literary world isn’t just late to the party in co-opting Hip Hop to move product. It is equally tardy in throwing off the institutional influence” (96). He continues,

Hip Hop novelists don’t need a free pass, merely a critical infrastructure that approaches lit hop as it would any other genre: on its own terms, with an eye toward understanding what is being attempted. . . Perhaps our own immunity from this generational malaise stems from Hip Hop’s love of collaging, sampling, dislocating, and reconfiguring; the more that’s been said and done already, the more we have to do. (96-97)

Here, Mansbach suggests that with the changing landscape of America and its culture, the frameworks we use to engage texts can also be revisited.¹³ Mansbach also speaks to the need for a critical infrastructure that employs critical praxes as a way to engage the literature of Hip Hop. With all of the progress that has been made to broaden the scope of Hip Hop culture, more progress can be made by taking a critical lens to more Hip Hop texts. My project takes up Mansbach’s charge and joins a collection of other literary scholars whose work call for new directions in how we classify and analyze Hip Hop literature.

¹¹ Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, Houston Baker, and Arnold Rampasad are all trained in literary criticism. They also serve as music critics. In fact, Houston Baker, drawing from the blues tradition, provides vernacular theory for reading African American literature in his collection of essays, *Blues Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*.

¹² Hughes talks at length about his love of jazz and other forms of musical expression in Negro life in his 1926 work “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

¹³ Barbara Christian in “The Race for Theory.”

While Mansbach makes clear connections between Hip Hop's music, the culture, and its literary representations, Hip Hop feminist scholar Danyel Smith fights against attempts to categorize and marginalize these literary representations because of their subject matter and language. Smith discusses some of these labels and what is considered literature in her essay "Black Talk and Hot Sex: Why Street Literature is Literature" (2006). Smith argues "behind the (academy's) self-righteousness was something old and cold: Black-lit authors weren't as angry at the authors of urban lit as they seemed. They were and are distressed that the stories street-lit authors tell are so much the same as our 'Black' stories were seventy years ago" (191). Here, Smith alludes to sexualized language in contemporary literature that appears in canonical texts like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).¹⁴ Smith points out the inconsistency that exists when one text is labeled "street" or "urban" and disregarded because of content and the author's use of language, while other texts, such as Hurston's, are regarded as high literature though employing the same kind of content and language.¹⁵

Smith's essay is a foundational piece for the work I do. I want to recover contemporary, street literature and Hip Hop literature authors and their works from the margins of academic and literary discourse. Through this project, I reevaluate the literariness of these texts, and lay claim to them by stripping them of sometimes stigmatizing labels like "urban" or "ethnic" fiction. I do this by calling these texts literature; then, I conduct intertextual analyses of these texts. Furthermore, this project extends existing Hip Hop literary theory and carves out a new space for

¹⁴ During this time, Hurston's language would have been considered risqué because of its attention to the female body, desires, and sexual awakenings throughout the text. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* broaches a similar subject matter, but does so in a way that brings violence into the frame.

¹⁵ Although Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is now an accepted part of the African American literary tradition, some critics initially disregarded it and did not consider it a canonical text. One of the most famous critics of Hurston's text was Richard Wright. He criticized Hurston's novel in a 1937 review of the text called "Between Laughter and Tears."

authors who have been creating these types of works, yet find themselves outside of critical conversation. It begins this work by highlighting key moments across the trajectory of African American literature and Black feminism in which the critical and literary intersect.

In *The Encyclopedia of Hip Hop* (2009), Tarshia Stanley begins this work when she provides a survey of Hip Hop literature, music, and film. While extremely helpful with pointing toward the type of literature that can be categorized as Hip Hop literature, it offers no readings of these works that are feminist. Vanessa Irvin Morris in *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature* (2012) gives an overview of those texts that she considers canonical to the "street-lit" genre. Included in her list are Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Omar Tyree's *Flyy Girl* (1997), and Sapphire's *PUSH* (1997). She contends, "these titles are representative of the genre as a whole because, by and large these authors have established themselves as writers and publishers of quality titles after a decade or more into the renaissance era of this genre" (58). It is no mistake that Morris' list begins with Souljah's text because its reception, content, and perspectives are unlike any other texts that precede it. Morris continues by saying, "the titles all tell street tales that are candid, realistic, and uncompromising in characterizations and plot developments that exhibit a tension between characters and their relationship to their surroundings, thus contributing to the naturalist style of American literary tradition" (58). Here, Morris makes a clear case for why these texts are not just street fiction; they do have literary significance. Morris' perspective is key to understanding the need for taking these works up and engaging them critically. Librarians are familiar with popular titles, and they know what is in demand. Morris continues, "The realism of the stories makes an immediate impact on readers, and that impact continues beyond the book to focus on the author . . . and the author's subsequent contributions to the genre" (59). The high demand for texts by Souljah and others

proves that there is an audience for these texts. The problem with this text is that it classifies potential Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop feminist literature as “street” or “urban” works, and does not engage these works critically. However, that missing critical engagement is happening.

Rap music and the literature it influences are the narrative of the marginalized, younger voices of African Americans, post-Civil Rights. These narratives are a historical, cultural, social, and political commentary for its generation. Furthermore, for African American women of the Hip Hop generation, this “street” or “inner city” fiction has acted as a collective narration for their experiences. Moreover, when we study these texts, in particular those that give voice to African American women’s perspectives, we gain fresh insight and perspectives that prove valuable to continuing growth and diversity in the academy. I insert myself into this space between canonical African American texts and street literature, and I bridge it by analyzing street literature such as Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1997) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* (2013). This project shows how these conversations can include street literature and Hip Hop literature. Although Hip Hop feminists like Joan Morgan and Tricia Rose use Hip Hop feminism as a framework, they are using it in other fields to engage other modes of cultural expression. Pough’s work is situated in between Hip Hop feminism and literature, yet focuses on autobiography. Morgan’s work is more culturally steeped in Hip Hop feminism. These are the critics with whom I am engaging. Their works represent a robust discourse theorizing the Black feminist literary tradition. Now, there is a new conglomerate of Hip Hop scholars who are pushing for the recognition of more literary forms of criticism in these spaces. Because African American women have turned their everyday theorizing into a literary and cultural space, it needs a political, social, and literary commitment. Because of Hip Hop scholars’ and cultural critics’ commitment to producing works that are

attentive to the lives, needs, and experiences of African American women, Black feminists also have an investment in Hip Hop literature and feminist renderings of Hip-Hop literature. My project shifts the critical lens that is Hip Hop feminist theory to the literary tradition.

Overview

This project is divided into two parts. Part 1 pairs a canonical text of African American literature with a representation of street literature for a comparative reading that allows these texts to operate within the same critical spaces. Chapter 2, “You Can’t Run from the Streets: Examining Failed Escapes in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and Shay Youngblood’s *Black Girl in Paris* (2000),” compares an earlier example of street literature to a contemporary representation of street literature. This intertextual analysis focuses on female protagonists who take “journeys” either metaphorically or physically. The result of these journeys is a realization that the literal and figurative street is almost impossible to escape. Lutie Johnson, in Ann Petry’s *The Street*, is internally colonized within America. Though she lives in the North, she journeys in and out of urbanized ghettos, in an attempt to escape her current status. Lutie’s reality is she cannot escape the realities of African American womanhood, namely the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect in the street. Eden, in Shay Youngblood’s *Black Girl in Paris*, takes a physical journey from Atlanta, Georgia to Paris, France to escape American racism and find her “writerly voice,” but she encounters similar issues of race, class, and gender, even abroad, as she navigates the Parisian streets, while trying to find her identity.

In this chapter, I propose that place affects how each of these women navigates the urban streets. Placed side by side, these narratives show a trajectory of Black feminist literature that ranges from modern to contemporary, making a case for works like Youngblood’s not to be labeled as “street fiction,” but to be read as street literature. Eliminating the label “fiction” allows

for more intertextual analyses of the similarities between these two works despite the times in which they are written. For example, *The Street* takes place in the Northern streets. Yet, as an African American woman, Lutie is imprisoned in New York. Similarly, Eden a woman living inside the New South and away from legal segregation, also feels imprisoned in her environment and escapes to Paris in an attempt to find herself. Eden is forced out of her environment, only to find that regardless of “geographical positioning” and foreign streets, she must also confront issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender.¹⁶

In Chapter 3, I examine Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) as a link to Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1997). Morrison’s text addresses complicated sexual politics of young African American girls and is a canonized work of fiction. Sapphire’s text has recently become part of academic discussions through the work of Black feminist critics such as Patricia Hill Collins, Neal Lester, and others, who address the sexual politics surrounding African American women and girls of underrepresented groups. These critics read *PUSH* as giving voice and agency to voiceless and oppressed young girls of color, in the Hip Hop generation.

Just as Morrison’s novel comments on sexual politics of young African American girls, *PUSH* also addresses these same issues in a contemporary setting where the crack and AIDS epidemics have left lasting impressions on the urban landscape, not unlike the world of Pecola Breedlove. It is a contemporary text, which mirrors Hip Hop culture. I propose that Sapphire’s text can be included in the same conversation as Morrison’s text because Sapphire “writes beyond the ending” of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Rachel DuPlessis argues that women writers of the 20th century “write beyond” when they rewrite, recreate, and reinterrogate forms and characters previously introduced by their literary foremothers. The similarities between

¹⁶ Here, I am referring to Violet Eudine BARRITEAU and her position on the Caribbean perspective of Black feminist scholarship.

Morrison's characters' narratives in *The Bluest Eye* and the realities Precious faces in *PUSH* do just that, and I argue that Sapphire's continuation of a familiar narrative extends an existing discourse.

Part Two of this project is a study in Sister Souljah's formulation and expansion of Hip Hop literature: Chapter 4, "Creeping into the Conversation" Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* and the Emergence of Hip Hop literature and Chapter 5, *A Deeper Love Inside: Toward a Hip Hop Feminist Literature*. Chapters 4 and 5 continue to examine the "literary fiction" vs. "popular fiction" debate by explicating how Sister Souljah writes out of a larger Hip Hop culture. Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* present chilling narratives that transcend street life to address how young African American girls cope with the street economy, racism, classism, and sociopolitical hardships of female protagonists. These protagonists reject societal norms upon them, which white, patriarchal society prescribes. Specifically, if given the space to function, without the stigma of "street fiction" or "urban fiction" attached, these works add diverse critical and social attention to a rapidly expanding genre.

In Chapter 5, I read Souljah's *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*, not as "street literature," but as a staple of an emerging genre: Hip Hop Feminist literature. Souljah's work is an example of Hip Hop feminist literature, whether she claims the term "feminist" or not because of her treatment of Porsche Santiago's character. Winter is not a weak, submissive character; instead, she is the protagonist and force behind efforts to save a deteriorating family legacy. Souljah continues this tradition of the strong, African American girl with Porsche. Porsche's story addresses the incarceration of young African American girls and the disruptions of families as a result of drug culture and the "War on Drugs," prison violence, mental illness,

and the restructuring of family and community. Souljah's creation of real, raw, street narratives against the backdrop of Hip Hop culture has her text on the periphery of the critical and academic conversations; however, as more scholars, like Justin Gifford and Gwendolyn Pough pay critical attention to her work, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is moving closer to the center of academic discussion. I argue that her expansion of Hip Hop literature into Hip Hop feminist literature further proves the benefit of studying these texts, in African American scholarship and critical conversations, as opposed to relegating them to the margins of academic discussion.

I conclude by revisiting the purpose for this study and where this research extends the existing discourses related to new directions for Hip Hop feminism. The conclusion suggests new ways of expanding the tradition of contemporary African American literature and the creation of Hip Hop feminist literature while also looking for ways to continue this research as I look toward the current state of Hip Hop literary theories and literatures.

CHAPTER 2

“YOU CAN’T RUN FROM THE STREETS”: TRACING FAILED ESCAPES IN ANN PETRY’S *THE STREET* (1946) AND SHAY YOUNGBLOOD’S *BLACK GIRL IN PARIS* (2000)

“She and Bub had to get out of 116th street. It was a bad street... wasn’t just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can. And it wasn’t just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other.” –Ann Petry’s *The Street*

“I was living in two places, night and day. In the night place I ran but they never caught me, and in the morning brown angels kissed my face. I woke up with tears on my pillow.” –Shay Youngblood’s *Black Girl in Paris*

Ann Petry’s *The Street* hails as a hallmark of naturalist writing in the African American literary tradition. Its protagonist, Lutie Johnson, finds herself in an oppressive, bleak state in America’s North. As Lutie seeks out upward economic mobility in the northern landscape, she has to confront its streets and the dangers they present. Petry crafts a narrative that employs the street as a character, with real social, economic, and racial implications for African American women. Similarly, Shay Youngblood’s *Black Girl in Paris* is a contemporary rendering of the urban landscape, but one that extends far beyond the North. Set during the Civil Rights Movement, Youngblood’s novel revisits the migration narrative by tracing Eden’s journey from the American South to Paris, France. Her protagonist, Eden, an aspiring writer, journeys out of the South, except for Eden, the American North is not far enough. She, like many African American writers and entertainers just a generation before her, escapes to Paris for a life free of the physical constraints of racism; the new-found freedom of Paris, Eden believes, will empower her to become a writer. Though Lutie does not journey from South to North and abroad like

Eden, Lutie does migrate across the northern landscape. Both Lutie and Eden take journeys in search of more amiable conditions; they navigate the streets, both in the Northern US and in Paris, France, in an attempt to secure a life free of economic hardship and racial bigotry. Though the issues are not exactly the same in America and in Paris, there are some key similarities in the ways in which racism, sexism, and classism affect the decisions both Lutie and Eden face. Though the cultural histories of racism differ in both environments, the thing that is constant is that Lutie and Eden have to confront the street's urban landscape. What they discover is that sometimes, "you can't run from the streets."

Juxtaposition of these stories is important because they reveal the ways in which African American women writers engage not only feminism, but also intersectionality, and create a street literature that shows the way geographical and metaphysical spaces converge upon African American female bodies. These narratives reveal a trope in African American narratives in which the street is more than a place or a backdrop. For example, *The Street* takes in a northern, industrial global city; Petry's setting is indispensable for several reasons. First, the timing of the narrative is important because, in some African American folklore, personal letters, and newspaper stories, the industrial North is represented as a veritable, racial utopia where war-time labor shortages promise economic success. Second, African Americans were encouraged to shake off the shackles of their past and to embrace all of the promises that northern city life had to offer. Essayists such as Alain Locke wrote about utopian, northern spaces. Third, the second migration, which occurred slightly before and during World War II, saw African Americans become a mostly urban people for the first time in the history of Africans in America. Unlike most immigrants who came to America's urban, industrial cities, African Americans were not allowed to choose their own neighborhoods. By a series of methods such as redlining, African

Americans were often locked into certain, dilapidated housing situations with little hope for improvement. Many African American writers, including Petry, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, began to describe the dismal condition of life in supposed racial utopias.¹⁷

Lutie is a product of the North, and must navigate the vagaries of its covert racism, sexism, and classism while she confronts the streets to which she is confined.

Similarly, Eden, a woman living in the urban South, in Atlanta, Georgia, post-Civil Rights Movement, also feels imprisoned in her environment, though there are no vestiges of the segregation that once characterized her Southern landscape. Eden escapes to Paris in an attempt to finally achieve her artistic goals. For Eden, this type of artistic freedom is neither accessible nor achievable in the US because of continuous racism and sexism prevalent in American society. Eden escapes her environment, only to find that regardless of geographical positioning, the street whether in the US or abroad poses similar issues for African American women. African American women must confront issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender in the northern US streets and in the streets of Paris. Like Lutie, her 1946 predecessor, who wanders the streets of Harlem looking to achieve the economic comfort of the American Dream, Eden finds that even in Paris, the dominant, Western culture inscribes certain notions upon her African American, female flesh which limit her earning potential and imprisons her as an artist.

Even though they appear in different decades and are set in different countries, the stories of Lutie and Eden are quite similar; in fact, they mirror one another. It is important to place these women side by side because it further allows the reader to gain insight into how environment or place affects women. Geographical positioning does not afford the escape these women seek. I argue that, when put in conversation with each other, *The Street* and *Black Girl in Paris* provide

¹⁷ Paul Laurence Dunbar is credited with having written the first migration narrative, *Sport of the Gods* (1902), in which the appalling effects of ghetto life are described fully.

a trajectory of women who must navigate an urban landscape in order to find their place both in America and abroad, but who are unable to escape sexism, racism, and poverty because of respectability politics, socioeconomic politics, and sexual politics that prevent them from being comfortable in their own space. Changing the ways in which street literature is classified makes way for texts like Youngblood's to gain more critical attention. More critical attention brings diverse perspectives to a text that adds a global perspective to issues of race, class, gender and the ways in which these issues intersect for women on the street.

There has been much scholarship devoted to Petry's works, particularly *The Street*, which has been, unfortunately, labeled as *Native Son's* feminine counterpart. Scholars have worked toward disentangling the book from these kinds of limiting labels. For example, Keith Clark, in "A Distaff Dream Deferred? Ann Petry and the Art of Subversion," contends that Petry

recasts the Herculean quest for the American Dream in an unequivocally female context . . . the novel represents the 'distaff' side of the African-American literary tradition, emerging as a groundbreaking work in its examination of the black woman's pursuit of happiness . . . she illustrates how black women subvert the quest for the American Dream and fulfill their own version of it. (495-497 Clark)

Twenty years later, Clark continues to argue for deeper explorations of Petry as an artist independent of Wright, in *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* (2013). He contends that *The Street* is, in fact, a gothic novel that "moves beyond the realm of 'social' terror. The novel's catholicity marks Petry as a malleable gothic architectonics, the framework of which she manipulates and alters for manifold rhetorical ends" (Clark 97).¹⁸ Though Clark does much to separate Petry from Wright, it is also necessary to continue to bring new insights to Petry's text. Clark's works points to different ways of conversing with Petry's text across different decades. Labeling Petry

¹⁸ Clark is reading critic Evie Shockley's essay, "Buried Alive: Gothic Homelessness, Black Women's Sexuality and (Living) Death in Ann Petry's *The Street*," and is evoking her reading of Petry's construction of social terror for poor, African American residents in Harlem.

as a naturalist reveals a masculinization of criticism, and additional readings of the texts, those that include feminist critiques of the texts, add fresh insight by introducing feminist perspectives and voices to her works. While the Wright-Baldwin influence of subsequent male writers, such as Reed and Ellison, is widely studied, few African American women writers like Petry receive the same kind of critical treatment.¹⁹ Granted, Wright is a great author and is a mainstay in African American literary critical conversations, but placing Petry's texts in conversation with texts from other genres, specifically street literature, opens up more ways to engage her text.

Reading Petry's text as street literature places this text in conversation with *Black Girl in Paris*, reveals a continuum of influence in African American women's writings, and allows for a diversification in conversation. One way to diversify the conversations around Petry's and Youngblood's texts is to think more broadly about how these works function when placed into conversation with texts with thematic and theoretical similarities. Specifically, this means examining the ways in which different women engage these works. Cheryl Wall, in "Nellie—Pioneer of Black Feminist Literary Criticism: Nellie McKay and Black Women's Studies" argues,

Since 1988 our awareness of additional lenses through which to read and interpret has only grown. Critics now employ lens[es] that zoom in on differences of sexuality, ethnicity, national, and transnational identity. But as the awareness of difference continues to grow, the ability to negotiate shifts in perspective . . . becomes ever more necessary. (Wall 19)

Though Wall is specifically discussing a reading McKay does of Petry's *The Narrows* (1953), the sentiment can also be applied to contemporary readings of *The Street*. There is much to be gained from revisiting older, canonical works. Revisiting older works and putting them in

¹⁹ Thanks to the pioneering work of Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston remains one of the few African American female writers of the Harlem Renaissance who remains widely taught and anthologized. Toni Morrison is the last American writer, and the first African American, to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Though an octogenarian, she continues to write. Her last novel, *God Help the Child*, debuted in 2015.

conversation with comparable, contemporary texts allows for diversification of critical conversations with works like *The Street* and *Black Girl in Paris*. As Wall suggests, McKay recognized this need for newer critical lenses and shifts in perspective when applying those criticisms.

When examining how Lutie and Eden experience similar difficulties with systemic racism, classism, and gender disparities, it becomes clear that these women are subject to these difficulties regardless of which streets they frequent. Given the historical exclusion of African American women from the white dominated waves of the feminist movements throughout the United States and Europe, this is an important point, which claimed to unite all women in the battle against sexism while excluding those women of color who often scrubbed white women's floors for pitiful wages as domestics. White women and white, female feminists are placed in a position of privilege above African American women. Battling against sexism can unite women. Classism can unite the poor. This is particularly important when examining discrimination against African American women. Those two identities are intertwined and cannot be severed. Kimberly Crenshaw, in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," claims that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 24). Moreover, any discourse that attempts to engage in an accurate discussion of the oppression and discrimination that African American women face must discuss the two in tandem. Employing intersectionality as a means to analyze literature can only be beneficial to canon growth and expansion. In a later essay, "Mapping the Margins," Williams comments, "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these

differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (377). Intersectionality provides a framework that allows Lutie’s and Eden’s blackness and femaleness to be viewed through the same lens. After doing so, then the work can be done to apply different modes of thinking to contemporary writers and their works.

Although critic Suzanne Jones, in her essay “*Black Girl in Paris: Shay Youngblood’s Escape from the ‘Last Plantation,’*” places Youngblood’s text side by side with James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962), *The Fire Next Time* (1961), *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), the novel has not been placed into conversation with Petry’s *The Street*. Both texts showcase other African American women who feel the urgency to escape their surroundings while they search for home, a safe space, and love that is otherwise unavailable to them in their previous or current environment. Jones’ reading of Youngblood’s text is helpful in providing another lens through which to critique African American women’s narratives. She invokes Thadious Davis’ observations about African American authors and artists who migrate to Paris in pursuit of creative freedom and an escape from the racial and political landscape in the American South.²⁰ Jones argues that Eden “sees such a move as a step away from the safe, respectable work in a museum that she takes after disappointing her parents by majoring in English, rather than nursing. She believes that a sojourn in Paris will provide a necessary first step toward a career in writing” (44). Here, Jones positions Youngblood’s Eden alongside her contemporaries like James Baldwin. Eden’s purpose for going to Paris is two-fold; she wants to escape the American Southern past from which she runs in her sleep, and she wants to experience artistic freedom like James Baldwin did almost 30 years before her. For Eden, there is no artistic opportunity for African American women writers, particularly during this violent

²⁰ Davis, Thadious M. “Sashaying through the South.” *South to the Future: An American Region in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Fred Hobson. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002. Print.

period. Her mother tells her to just be a nurse or something that both pays the bills and does not require a voyage out of the country. In Eden's mind, she cannot achieve her goal of being a writer in the vein of James Baldwin unless she follows in his footsteps and sojourns in Paris.

In analyzing Petry's *The Street* and Youngblood's *Black Girl in Paris*, I will shift the gaze toward a Black feminist reading of these texts, by employing Crenshaw's intersectionality as a lens through which the reader is more aptly able to engage both Lutie and Eden as they battle respectability politics, socioeconomic politics, and sexual politics. In this way, the reading of Youngblood's text reveals an opportunity to broaden critical conversations within African American letters, as African American women writers continue to engage feminist critiques (including intersectionality) in order to demonstrate the limiting forces that cripple their attempts to carve metaphysical spaces for themselves.

Escaping Respectability Politics

The societal circumstances surrounding Lutie Johnson and other women in her position dictate the level of success that she will be able to achieve. In 1940s Harlem, African American women work mostly as domestics; African American men are mostly out of work. Racial dynamics between African Americans and whites are strained, and there is a clear separation between the races and classes in urbanized ghettos. Women like Lutie navigate the urban landscape in search of work and economic stability in order to support their families. Oftentimes, this means women are the heads of the households. This is a stark contrast from prescriptive societal rules for women in general, particularly since women are often expected to be caregivers, wives, mothers, and domestics. Petry's use of Lutie positions African American women in the working class. Doing so places Lutie in direct conflict with elderly women who have been taught that the woman's place is at home. In *The Street*, the respectability politics that

Petry highlights through a former employer shape how Lutie navigates available modes for employability and economic stability. Lutie's upbringing teaches her that the woman's place is in the home, specifically if the husband is unemployed. The men of the novel who are employed in some way use their positions as economic free agents in attempts to possess Lutie sexually. Interestingly, women in *The Street* are the majority of the working class. One of these figures is Mrs. Pizzini, Lutie's old employer. Lutie remembers Mrs. Pizzini saying that it is,

Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man. Obviously she had been right, for here on this street the women trudged along overburdened, overworked, their own homes neglected while they looked after someone else's while the men on the street swung along empty-handed, well dressed, and carefree. (Petry 65)

Since Lutie is a domestic worker with limited options for advancement, Lutie is much like the other women in the street. Those women work in white women's homes in order to provide food and shelter for their families. Most times they receive little assistance from the men in their lives. Because of racial discrimination, African American women like Lutie are normally married to African American men who face either unemployment or underemployment. Therefore, African American women are forced outside the home to contribute to the economic well-being of their families. Mrs. Pizzini, though an immigrant who can barely speak English, is not African American and is therefore afforded certain privileges in America denied to Lutie and other African American women, who are forced to work as domestics. Although Mrs. Pizzini is only featured in the aforementioned instance, her condemnation of working women permeates Lutie's narrative. Mrs. Pizzini is a representation of the old ways of doing things. Her comments give Lutie pause while she contemplates her life with her husband. More to the point, the street itself seems to also have more control over what a woman in Lutie's station in life will become.

White society's respectability politics are at play even on 116th Street. The street is a liminal space. It is the home for the overburdened and overworked, yet it can provide no real home or comfort to any of its inhabitants, particularly Lutie and her son, Bub. Either the street is filled with women who are overworked or men who are out of work. Both circumstances prevent the home from being a supportive, nurturing, and warm place of escape. As a result, Lutie feels that there are no other options for her as an African American woman in 1940s Harlem. On the one hand, Lutie cannot be more successful and harder working than her man because that will destroy the myth that a woman's place is at home, not as the head of a household. On the other hand, the only jobs that Lutie can take are domestic work. These jobs do not pay enough for Lutie to support a household, hence the economic circumstances that bring her to the streets of Harlem in the first place. Even in the African American community, African American women are held to white society's impossible standards of what it means to be a wife, mother, and provider. Her only option is to walk the streets of Harlem in search of better economic opportunities even if it means she cannot be a wife or a full-time mother. Those women who assume this position, do so either because they are single mothers, like Lutie, or because their man is one of those poor, African American men on the street. As she states, "And yet, she thought, what else is a woman to do when her man can't get a job?" (Petry 65).

Additionally, Petry uses the elder women in Lutie's life to trace the origins of her struggle with society's respectability politics. Though another minor character, Lutie's grandmother is indicative of a lineage of African American women who are policed by ancient maternal figures who had little or no control over how they lived. Lutie remembers a conversation between herself and her Granny. Granny had "forseen men like this Super. She had told Pop. 'let her get married, Grant. Lookin' like she do men goin' to chase her till they catches

up. Better she get married” (Petry 76). Granny is that voice from the past that suggests though the world can be cold and evil, there are certain strategies African American women use to cope. In *The Street*, marriage is one of those strategies. Lutie does marry, but the marriage dissolves due to economic pressures. These are mainly Jim’s unemployment and Lutie’s employment as a domestic in Connecticut. Following the dissolution of the marriage, subsequent loss of employment, and a string of employment failures, Lutie can never save enough to divorce Jim, so that becomes less of a priority for Lutie. Here, marriage is one of those standards Lutie is expected to abide by even though Jim and Lutie do not have a strong, supportive, or healthy marriage. Granny is looking at marriage as a means to an end. Lutie is looking at her current marriage as another bill; she wants to move on, but cannot afford to dissolve the union.

Though Jim abandons Lutie for another woman, Lutie does not blame him for the dissolution of their marriage. He, too, is a victim of the racist environment in which they both live. The streets are filled with men who “lounged against the sides of the building, their hands in their pockets while they stared at the women who walked past, probably deciding which woman they should select to replace the wife who was out working all day” (Petry 65). And later, “an awful lot of colored marriages ended like that. Mrs. Hedges had implied the same thing shortly after they moved in. Lutie was coming home from work, and Mrs. Hedges having greeted her cordially from the window said, ‘You married, dearie?’” (Petry 76). So, Mrs. Hedges and her respectability politics or lack thereof thrusts young, seventeen-year-old girls into marriages that are doomed to fail because of economic instability brought on by racist hiring practices. Though it seems that an escape from marriage would be ideal, for Lutie it is just one more thing she cannot afford. Divorcing Jim costs money and Lutie’s economic situation prevents her from doing so. Additionally, this puts a strain on her ability to foster any healthy relationship. Lutie is

very clear that she is not the type to use her body as a vehicle to obtain financial stability, though Boots Smith later tests this. So, as Petry situates Lutie and other women in *The Street*, a woman's place is in the street, not in her home, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. Her place is outside the home, on 116th Street, fighting to survive. Intra-racial respectability politics demand that women like Lutie, those who are heading toward middle age with young children, stay at home. Racist economic policies force them outside the home to help support their families. Sometimes, in the case of Lutie Johnson, they are the sole breadwinners through no fault of their own.

Like Lutie in Harlem, Eden works as domestic in Paris, yet she is still confronted by respectability politics which seek to keep her in a subservient or service role. Youngblood's Eden discovers that there is no escape from domestic work and poverty in Paris. Eden maneuvers a life around whites and negotiates a way to earn a living and work with the French. However, there are rules for working and living abroad. There are also consequences to being an American in Paris. As the narrator declares, "You will grow to care for the American family, but remember that you are paid to wipe their tears, prepare their meals, and listen to their complaints, paid to celebrate their triumphs" (Youngblood 89). This condescension, while understated, is another way Eden is put in her "place." Though she is a foreigner, Eden is still an African American woman in Paris, and that means she must always remember her place: in a position of service, inferior to white women.

While Eden spends her time tending to an American family in Paris, she cannot escape systemic racism and the constraints it places on African American female domestics. Similar to Lutie, Eden has to take care of a white woman's home and children, instead of having a secure

space for herself. Eden works as an *au pair*, in order to have food and a warm place to sleep.²¹ This domestic job also gets Eden farther and farther away from becoming the writer she wants to be. Though this job affords Eden temporary financial stability that modeling could not provide, she is still not doing the thing she wants to do most: writing. Eden's confrontation with soft bigotry is most prominent in her conversations with Charlotte Rockefeller, a member of one of the most powerful family lineages in the United States.

Charlotte, though nice, is another reminder of the unsustainable level of respectability that African American women are expected to maintain. As a member of such a prominent family, Charlotte has a level of privilege and wealth that prevents her from relating to Eden. While Charlotte means to be nice to Eden, the way she talks to her, specifically about her writing, is condescending and out of touch with Eden's reality. Eden rejects any notion of her parents' ideas of respectable employment first by dreaming to be a writer, instead of a nurse, then by accepting a job as an *au pair*. However, Charlotte reminds Eden of those societal restraints. Eden can never possess the Rockefellers' level of wealth, social status, or acceptance. Charlotte's obsession with Eden seems like a charity project that needs Charlotte's help. She wants to make Eden her pet Negro project to fix up and make respectable by teaching her to have class and culture. In Charlotte's mind, helping Eden be better is her purpose. That means weighing in on her appearance, her friends, and her profession. All Eden wants to do is write, and Charlotte wants to control how Eden does that. When Charlotte attempts to control Eden's writing, Eden makes a decision to reject any type of friendship and association with Charlotte. Eden says, "She knew I wanted to be a writer. 'Write something happy, something gay. Your life

²¹ *Au Pair* is French for baby sitter or nanny. As *Youngblood* describes Eden's responsibilities to the children, they align closely with the duties and responsibilities of American domestic workers who earn a living by taking care of white families, for little pay or room and board.

is very interesting, but the sorrows of the poor angry, blacks, my dear, that has been done” (Youngblood 83). Rockefeller’s “advice” here is reminiscent of Richard Wright’s essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.”²² While Wright champions inclusiveness and a link between art and social progress in African American writing, Charlotte expresses distaste for any future writings on the subject of the African American condition. Eden ends their association because she is very clear about who she is as a writer, and does not need Charlotte Rockefeller, someone who experiences white privilege and upper-class economic status, telling her what to write about. With Charlotte, Youngblood points out the tendency for the white elite to constantly seek control of the type of writing that African Americans produce, even without knowing much about the art’s content, context, or purpose.

Though Eden never discloses the specifics of her writing to Charlotte, other than she wants to write like James Baldwin, it is her professed affection for Baldwin and his works that gives Charlotte pause. Charlotte has an interesting reading of Baldwin and his perceived experience in Paris. She says, “Paris was a relief for him. He didn’t have ‘colored only’ signs to deal with, there weren’t places off limits to him because of his color. He could relax here. I don’t believe he was angry as he seemed. . . . He was preachy and very proper as if he were in church giving a sermon to the unconverted. . . . He made me want to burn down my father’s house and dance around the flames” (Youngblood 84). In a way, Charlotte seems to disregard Baldwin as a mentor or inspiration for Eden, instead positioning herself in his place. Charlotte’s opinion about the type of art she should produce is a thinly veiled attempt to subvert Eden’s voice and remake her into someone respectable by white society’s, namely, the Rockefellers’, standards. Thus,

²² Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” poses the question: “Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes’ humanity?” (99). Wright critiqued existing Negro writing for lacking a substantive concept to link the political and social change with the artistic and creative productions of blacks.

Eden still finds no escape from racism and soft bigotry in Paris. About Charlotte Rockefeller, Eden comments, “She was trying to transform me into a black Rockefeller, and she was failing miserably. There were too many rules and restrictions in the life she was planning for me. This was not the kind of freedom I came to Paris for” (Youngblood 82). Thus, Eden, like Lutie, finds no escape from economic hardships and restrictions.

Escaping Socioeconomic Politics

The social and economic barriers for African American women impede their ability to exist in their environment free of poverty and classism. In *The Street*, the implications of race, class, and gender are particularly relevant. In a reflective moment, Lutie considers the fact that her current circumstances mirror those of other women in a similar station in life. Additionally, Lutie recognizes the long tradition of African American women who have been forced to do domestic work in order to survive. Lutie says,

You see, colored people have been shining shoes and washing clothes and scrubbing floors for years and years. White people seem to think that’s the only kind of work they’re fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least. She thought about this small dark apartment they were living in, about 116th Street which was filled to overflowing with people who lived in just such apartments as this, about the white people on the downtown streets who stared at her with open hostility in their eyes, and she started talking swiftly, forgetting to choose her words. (Petry 70)

Here, Lutie reflects on the circumstances to which she is resigned. Socioeconomic and racial politics lead to an existence for Lutie that impedes her advancement in society. The work she does to survive is not glamorous. In fact, it pays very little and requires hard manual labor. However, Lutie’s options are limited. The disparities between African Americans and whites in the same city confront Lutie when she looks into their eyes. Furthermore, the hostility she sees in the eyes of those white people is a reminder that African Americans are expected to stay in their

place. Any socioeconomic advancements will be viewed as a threat to white society and their jobs, or it will be viewed as an attempt to rise above one's place.

Petry uses Lutie's interactions with her son, Bub, to further highlight this point. Lutie discovers that Bub has taken an afterschool job of shining shoes, like many of the other children in the apartment building. Her response to such an innocent ambition to make money for the overall betterment of their family is both shocking and disheartening. Specifically, it is a cold splash of water to the face for readers:

Her voice grew thick with rage. 'I'm working to look after you and you out here in the street shining shoes just like the rest of these little niggers.' And she thought, You know that isn't all there is involved. It's also that Little Henry Chandler is the same age as Bub, and you know Little Henry is wearing gray flannel suits and dark blue caps and long blue socks and fine dark brown leather shoes. He's doing his homework in that big warm library in front of the fireplace. And your kid is out in the street with a shoeshine box. He's wearing his after-school clothes, which don't look too different from the ones he wears to school—shabby knickers and stockings with holes in the heels, because no matter how much you darn and mend he comes right out of his stockings. (Petry 67)

The moments in which Lutie shows rage are just an indication that she is slowly losing the ability to cope. There is nothing worse for her than seeing her son succumb to the same socioeconomic situation from which she is working so desperately to rescue them. Bub's youth and naiveté does not afford him the opportunity to understand why Lutie does not want him to work or spend too much time chasing money. Innocently, he thinks he is only doing what will bring his family less stress and more income. In reality, his working serves as a reminder for Lutie of their dire financial situation.

Lutie's desire for her son to have more out of life is a direct reflection of her awareness of the lack of societal advantage and opportunity for those who become trapped in a domestic work environment. This is more evident when Lutie remarks,

It's also that you're afraid that if he's shining shoes at eight, he will be washing windows at sixteen and running an elevator at twenty-one, and go on doing that for the rest of his life. And you're afraid that this street will keep him from finishing high school; that it may do worse than that and get him into some kind of trouble that will land him in reform school because you can't be home to look out for him because you have to work. (Petry 67)

While Lutie fights socioeconomic challenges in Harlem, Eden's socioeconomic challenges are more closely linked to ongoing violence as a result of French xenophobia. Eden is in Paris to be a writer because her circumstances at home prevent her from exploring this creative avenue; she looks for the type of freedom in Paris which would allow her to do so. Instead, she is confronted with violent bombings, protests, work discrimination, and covert forms of racism. Although the violence and racism Eden runs from in Birmingham is not culturally the same as the violence Eden witnesses in Paris, those landscapes are filled with the same kinds of violence. The bombs dropping in Birmingham destroy churches; the bombs dropping in Paris destroy embassies. Because of these similarities, Eden learns first that there is no escape from the violent outburst of groups who seek social or economic reform or those who oppose it. Although Eden writes about the terror that plagues Birmingham, AL in her youth, Paris is supposed to be an escape from that. She writes,

When the four little girls were killed by a segregationist's bomb at church one Sunday morning in 1963, I had just started to write my name. I still remember writing theirs . . . Cynthia, Addie Mae, Carole, Denise . . . Our church sent letters of condolence to their families. We moved to Georgia, but I did not stop being afraid of being blown to pieces . . . on an ordinary day if God wasn't looking . . . for most of my childhood I woke up each morning tired from so much running in my dreams—from faceless men in starched white sheets, from policeman with dogs, from firemen with water hoses. (Youngblood 5)

Instead of being that safe place, the first day, and several days after her arrival in Paris, bombs are exploding. It is almost as if Birmingham, AL has been reincarnated abroad. Eden

reflects on this violence while Indego takes her on a tour of Paris.²³ The inherent need for one group to control another with fear and violent tactics is the same in both places. The difference is that Eden is in the oppressed group in the United States. In Paris, Eden is not the target of that violence, yet she still experiences other forms of racism. She remarks, “Hotel de Ville . . . had recently been the site of a bombing that killed a female postal clerk and wounded eighteen others. . . . Lebanese terrorists had given the French government an ultimatum to release three jailed suspected terrorists Four more bombs went off in the next six days, killing a total of eight people and wounding nearly two hundred” (Youngblood 45). And later, “It is true that there are no places here that keep a black person out, no, the French are not racist in that way. But there is a condescension, a superiority, a patronizing attitude that comes through between most foreigners and the average French person” (Youngblood 52). Here, Youngblood reveals that there is a global problem with violence, governmental policies, xenophobia from French citizens, naturalization, and citizenship. Ultimately, these issues are not relegated specifically to African Americans, but are aimed at the larger African Diaspora, particularly Algerians, Haitians, and formerly colonized Africans; therefore, there is no racial sanctuary.

Jones, in her treatment of Youngblood’s text, likens the text to Baldwin’s works in which he details his experiences in Paris and the tensions between the warring nations. She argues,

Youngblood calls attention to similarities between postcolonial tensions in France and violence during the civil rights era in the U.S. South. This comparison works to name southern white violence ‘terrorism’ and to point up the similarities in racial and ethnic tensions that Youngblood herself experienced in France in the mid-1980s. Baldwin writes about tensions between the French and immigrants

²³ Indego helps Eden out by giving her room and board until she can find a job. In the beginning, this allowed Eden to focus on her quest to find James Baldwin, but she very quickly realizes that Indego is being too nice to her and getting nothing in return. Though she knows he will eventually want more than her friendship, Eden takes odd jobs in order to support herself, but she is unable to do so without Indego’s help. Eventually, she starts a sexual relationship with him, but she is not in love with Indego and he knows it. Eden has unfulfilling sex with Indego in order to survive. The sex is unfulfilling much like her relationship with Anthony. Eden stays with him until he leaves Paris and sublets his apartment to someone else.

from Algeria . . . about tensions between the French and the Lebanese and the Haitians as well as the North Africans. (Jones 45)

While Petry writes about African Americans in urban epicenters like Harlem during and after the second migration, Youngblood mirrors her Parisian experiences through Eden. In Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Shaking the Tree: A Collection of New Fiction and Memoir by Black Women* (2003), an excerpt from Youngblood's text appears in which she prefaces her excerpt by providing the inspiration behind her novel and an account of her voyage to Paris in 1986. This expedition led to the creation of *Black Girl in Paris*. Youngblood comments, "I explored the ways in which an individual could create identity, cross sexual and cultural boundaries. . . . Eden found that the writer's life was not so glamorous as she imagined, that freedom had a price and Paris was not without its own variety of racism" (Danquah 264). Youngblood inserts these experiences into Eden's Parisian exploits. While Eden is attempting to find work, she comments on some of the laws that prevent Americans from obtaining work permits. She says, "working papers were difficult to get since stricter immigration rules were being enforced . . . officially the new laws were designed to contain the new wave of terrorism, unofficially they were created to keep out new immigrants. There are still many fascists in our society" (Youngblood 60). Again, while racism in the United States and Paris, France are not motivated by the same stimuli, there are some key similarities in how these conflicts affect Eden. When Eden leaves the United States, she does so in an attempt to escape laws that legalize segregation and support systemic racism and oppression of African Americans. The racially motivated laws of the Jim Crow South did much to ensure that races were kept separately. If African Americans were going to be a permanent part of society, these laws intended to separate the races and classes. Separate and equal is both separate and unequal under Jim Crow. These are the things Eden plans to escape. However, in Paris, immigrants are the targeted group of people. The dangers of terrorism that

Parisian officials feared is similar to the propaganda spread about the dangers of African Americans coming to power in United States. Eden does not understand the language very well, but she understands this concept. It does not occur to Eden that in her plan to escape an oppressive and dangerous environment in the United States she runs to a similarly oppressive and dangerous environment for a different group of minorities. As much as social and economic status have to do legislation meant to keep groups separate, racial politics also play a role in these tensions.

When Eden meets Malik, a French national from Haiti, he only further paints the picture of a racialized landscape in Paris. He explains that his family has a long history of conflict with the law and their experiences are not unlike many of those violent incidents in the American South. He and his family were “called dirty, stopped regularly by police and checked for drugs, turned down for jobs on the telephone when the interviewer asked his name. Both the Algerians and the French had lost many lives during the eight-year Algerian struggle for independence” (Youngblood 80-81). This is the first indication that skin color is also a problem in Paris. Through this inclusion, Youngblood paints a picture of global tension that extends beyond the confines of home. Fleeing the American streets for Parisian streets does not free Eden from socioeconomic politics. Instead, she witnesses firsthand how these issues affect minorities in both places.

Escaping Sexual Politics

While Lutie and Eden fight to avoid political, racial, and social conflict, both women grapple with sexual politics. Instead of fighting against countries and nations, which seek to control a population politically and economically, African American women fight to maintain agency over their bodies. In *The Street*, Jones’ (the superintendent) preoccupation with Lutie is

dangerous. Jones watches Lutie and uses her son, Bub, to gain access to her apartment. His goal is to insert himself into her life as a way to make her want him. The closer he gets to Lutie—her lipstick, her clothes, her bathroom—the more his disgust for Min, his live-in girlfriend, is apparent. While in Lutie’s apartment, Jones “sat down on the toilet seat and buried his head in his hands. Instantly his nose filled with the smell of the talc he had rubbed between his palms. He began thinking of Min. He would throw her out tonight. He had to get rid of her . . . He wouldn’t be able to stand the thought of her any more after being close to Lutie like this” (Petry 109). Jones’ masculine fantasies place him in a space where his sexual desires for Lutie’s body manifest themselves in disgust toward Min. Min is physically able to be the warm body that Jones sexually desires; yet, he is unable to find any sexual gratification or true satisfaction from her. Lutie, then, from the moment she entered the street apartments on 116th Street, is a symbol of unattainable sexual gratification for Jones. While Jones poses a formidable threat inside the apartment building, the street poses one outside.

Lutie’s failure to escape sexual politics make the street a place of lost hopes and dreams. Lutie is forced to confront the harsh realities of the street and the urban landscape after her career as a singer fails to materialize. Lutie dreams of having a better life; singing presents itself as a temporary solution to her problems. However, Junto refuses to pay Lutie to sing, and tells Boots he cannot have a relationship with Lutie either. When there is no assurance of money, Lutie’s dream of singing her way out of 116th Street fades. Once again, the streets of Harlem have Lutie trapped. After the singing job at the casino falls through, Lutie sees her 116th Street apartment through different eyes. After her confrontation with Boots, Lutie has a binary vision that allows Lutie to, floor by floor, really see her living conditions. There is more at stake than just overcrowded apartments where privacy is a luxury no one can afford. As Lutie is forced to

confront the bitter reality of her economic position, she remarks, “The whole house knows, just as I do, that Bill Smith, who never works, has come home drunk again and is beating his wife. Living here is like living in a structure that has a roof, but no partitions, so that privacy is destroyed, and even the sound of one's breathing becomes a known, familiar thing to each and every tenant” (Petry 313). There is an absence of demarcation between public and private space. As Lutie remarks on the aforementioned quote, she realizes that violence against the bodies of women in these confined spaces is quite common. It also speaks to the commonality of violence against women's bodies in the small spaces where African American and white men take particular advantage of women and use their bodies, not for intimate or sensual exchanges, but for an area for power struggle dynamics. In this area, however, there are no referees. Men have all the control. There are no advocates. Lutie never mentions seeking out Mrs. Smith and coming to her rescue. This is partly because Lutie is quite limited in how she can help. Her failure to help is more about accepting that she can offer little or no help for Mrs. Smith, so it is best that she refrains from intervening. When Lutie describes the environment and Mrs. Smith's cries, it appears to be normalized behavior in this environment: it is a dangerous norm.

Normalized African American violence is commonplace in highly populated urban spaces. More troubling, though, is the hyper-normality of domestic violence in these spaces. Throughout *The Street*, there are several instances where Lutie hears a woman screaming and crying as she endures physical assault. The only person who steps in to aid a woman being assaulted is Mrs. Hedges. However, Mrs. Hedges' motivations for helping Lutie are questionable. She does not help her out of sheer concern for her safety, but out of concern for a potential investment. Though Mrs. Hedges is the most powerful woman in the novel, her power is a direct result of Junto and his influence. Mrs. Hedges and Junto work in tandem; his desire to

sexually possess Lutie, and Mrs. Hedges' access to Lutie only complicate the sexual politics at work against Lutie: each person wants to use her body. Further, if Junto had been allowed access to Lutie, or if Lutie had relented to Junto's stealth-like advances, it is highly unlikely that Mrs. Hedges would have interfered in Lutie's near-rape encounter with Jones. For example, there is never a discussion or mention of Mrs. Hedges going to aid the other women in the tenement whose partners assault them. This is the dangerous, yet chilling reality of domestic and sexual assaults.

Moreover, Mrs. Hedges does not interfere in the physical assaults Jones makes against Min. Left to her own devices, Min shifts the power dynamic in the apartment with Jones. After consulting the root doctor, Prophet David, Min places a large, gold cross over the bed. When Jones sees it, he reacts in a defeated manner. Petry writes, "almost immediately he started backing away from the sight of it, retreating toward the living room where he wouldn't be able to see it" (140). And later, "Hence to him a cross was an alarming and unpleasant object, for it was a symbol of power" (Petry 140). It is also important to note that Min is left to stand up to Jones without the aid of any women in the novel; she is also the only woman who "escapes" the harshness of 116th Street. Power, then, becomes subjective; Min has the metaphysical power to stop Jones from physically abusing her, until she can escape. However, Mrs. Hedges has the means and opportunity to use the women and Junto to her advantage.

Even when Mrs. Hedges understands Lutie's predicament with Bub, Mrs. Hedges still offers her no real assistance or guidance that will allow Lutie to maintain possession of her sexual autonomy.²⁴ After visiting the lawyer, Mrs. Hedges brings Lutie back to the stark reality

²⁴ Jones befriends Bub as a way to get close to Lutie. Since Lutie and Bub need money, Jones convinces Bub to conduct a mail scam that involves stealing mail and money from several buildings in Harlem. Once Bub is caught, Bub is taken to juvenile detention. Meanwhile Lutie has no money to pay for a lawyer and no other way to earn

that her socioeconomic status could be different if she only used her body as a bargaining chip. Mrs. Hedges tells Lutie “Bub being in trouble you probably need some money. A friend of mine, a Mr. Junto—a very nice white gentleman, dearie—” (Petry 417). More disturbing though is that Mrs. Hedges does not understand, or that she understands too well, how this is part of the problem with women on the street. Their only opportunity for escape is to barter their bodies. Those young girls who room at Mrs. Hedges’ apartments are using their bodies for money, but ultimately Mrs. Hedges is the person who benefits. Those girls are Mrs. Hedges’ escape because she is unable to use her body in the same way, at least not in the way that men desire youth and beauty like Lutie’s, due to injuries in a fire.

Mrs. Hedges represents another facet of sexual politics in *The Street*. It is one thing to have the men, Jones, Junto, and Boots, sexually lusting after Lutie, covertly and overtly, but Mrs. Hedges also engages in and facilitates a kind of sexual exploitation. Sure, she provides a way for some girls to make money in order to survive the streets, but she also perpetuates an air of sexual impropriety and danger. There is no indication that any of the girls who work for Mrs. Hedges are any better off than Lutie. Instead of helping the girls succeed or save money, Mrs. Hedges is largely benefitting from their bodies much like the men who frequent Mrs. Hedges’ girls and the men who lust after Lutie. To make matters worse, instead of offering Lutie help, Mrs. Hedges offers a direct entrée into prostitution. The only difference is that Mrs. Hedges would control Lutie instead of Boots or Jones. Junto would still benefit from Lutie’s body. This realization disgusts Lutie and sends her into a rage. Lutie’s rage at Mrs. Hedges’ and Junto’s propositions reaches its climax after her exchange with Mrs. Hedges. As Lutie reflects on her situation, she

fumed at the top of her mind about a white gentleman wanting to sleep with a colored girl . . . Junto hadn’t wanted her paid for singing. Mrs. Hedges knew

money except by either offering her body to Junto, per Mrs. Hedges’ suggestion, or by submitting her body to Boots and then Junto. Either way she chooses, Lutie loses.

Junto. Boots Smith worked for Junto . . . and the anger in her grew and spread directing itself first against Junto and Mrs. Hedges and then against the street that had reached out and taken Bub and then against herself for having been partly responsible for Bub's stealing. (Petry 417)

Boots is propositioning Lutie for Junto, just as Mrs. Hedges propositions Lutie when she suggests that Lutie prostitute for financial security. Though Mrs. Hedges knows very little about who Lutie is, she suggests this rather subtly early in the novel. Later, after Bub is arrested, Mrs. Hedges more explicitly states, "You can get the money easy, baby . . . Junto's the answer. He'll give you the money like that . . . Just be nice to him as long as he wants and the two hundred bucks is yours. And being nice to Junto pays off better than anything else I know" (Petry 421). Although Junto has never been formally introduced to Lutie until this moment, his presence has been following Lutie, haunting her, throughout the novel. Mrs. Hedges was the first to allude to Junto in her description of a "nice white gentleman" who would help Lutie and other young girls out who need extra money. In response, "she heard what he said, knew exactly what he meant, and her mind skipped over his words and substituted other words" (Petry 421).

And later, "she thought, I would like to kill him, not just because he happens to be Junto, but because I can't even think straight about him or anybody else any more. It is as though he were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach" (Petry 422). Here, the reader is able to experience Lutie's rage first hand. While Lutie is processing Boots' words and his determination to possess her sexually before passing her over to Junto, Lutie finally fights back. While this is the only time she exhibits some control over her life, Lutie loses control over her body at the same time. While striking back at Boots, Lutie has an out of body experience in which she strikes back, almost robotically, at all of the things oppressing her. In her attempt to protect her body and reclaim agency over it, Petry does not allow Lutie to be in control. The rage that is festering inside her cannot be suppressed any longer. Boots' fleeting moment of control

over Lutie slips away at the same time his life does. It is important that Petry's last glimpse into Boots' stream of consciousness mirrors his true intent and Junto's intent. Boots' and Junto's bartering and negotiations of Lutie as property are the most destructive relationships/interactions in the novel.

Though Clark argues that Lutie's "own obsession with exploiting [Boots Smith] financially positions her more closely to Jones as someone guided by wolfish impulses," (105) one must not reposition Lutie in a way that makes her the person in control. The circumstances that land Lutie at Boots' apartment are a direct reflection on all of the male characters' preoccupation with usurping Lutie's authority and agency. Lutie's body is the prize, whether first or last, in Boots' eyes. This is clear when Petry writes, "Sure, Lutie would sleep with Junto, but he was going to have her first . . . he can have the leavings. After all he is white and this time a white man can have a black man's leavings" (422). Here, Lutie ponders the ways in which both Junto and Boots seek to possess her. They have decided amongst themselves who will have Lutie as if her opinion does not matter. Petry uses this moment of reflection to show how Lutie has been living under the control of two men and Mrs. Hedges since she moved to 116th Street. Their actions or inactions have dictated the majority of Lutie's life. These revelations cause Lutie's rage to erupt.

Lutie's rage reaches its climax in the scene where she murders Boots Smith. The vivid imagery and descriptions that Petry uses to describe the scene show that Lutie is finally striking back at her environment and its treatment of women, African American, and poor.

Even after he lay motionless, she kept striking him . . . she was venting her rage against the dirty, crowded street . . . dilapidated old houses . . . small dark rooms . . . narrow dingy hallways . . . the little lost girls in Mrs. Hedges' apartment . . . smashed homes where women did drudgery because their men had deserted them. She saw all these things and struck at them. (430)

Here, Lutie is striking back against those things that brought her to 116th Street in the beginning of the novel. Lutie continues to strike Boots, but his body continues to transform into the things that Lutie despises about 116th Street. As she strikes Boots, “the limp figure on the sofa became the moist-eyed glances of white men on the subway . . . the unconcealed hostility in the eyes of white women . . . the man at the Crosse School . . . Super pulling her down, down into the basement . . .” (Petry 430). Here, Lutie is striking against all of the men who have recently tried to take advantage of her body. Boots ceases to become a person, but becomes a symbol of the consequences of violence against female bodies instead.

Patricia Hill Collins, *In Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), argues, “Sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African American women could exercise autonomy, and thus tangibly distinguish themselves as free women both from the sexual exploitation of slavery as well as the demands of having thirteen babies in insular Southern rural families” (72). Lutie’s sexual autonomy is the one thing that she never relinquishes throughout the novel. Her attempts to advance economically are thwarted, not because she is a greedy opportunistic character, like Keith Clark’s gothic reading of Lutie would suggest, but because the men in Lutie’s space, in her life, are hell-bent on owning, or temporarily possessing, her body. It is this realization, at the novel’s climax, that leads to Lutie’s murderous strikes. She realizes that white society has long considered her body disposable. As such Lutie “was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape . . . at the turn of events that forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so now he faced reform school . . . a police record” (Petry 430). The real tragedy here is that the actions of these men, white society, poverty, and respectability politics ultimately orphan Bub. In essence, while Lutie’s life and body are disposable in the novel, Bub’s life is also cast

aside. As Lutie visualizes Bub becoming a product of the racially segregated, classist hegemony that governs and polices African American lives, Bub is highly likely to grow up to be just like Jones or Boots Smith. Lutie tells the reader early in the novel that she wants to get Bub away from Lil and Pop, but their escape from that life proves to be their detriment. Both Lutie and Bub never have a chance to thrive; they are always going to be casualties of the street. As the novel closes, the audience is left to envision Bub as he embarks on a life of uncertainty, poverty, and abandonment that, unfortunately, neither he nor Lutie ever has a chance to escape.

Sexual Politics in *Black Girl in Paris*

While economic inequality complicates sexuality in *The Street*, in *Black Girl in Paris*, for Eden, terror often juxtaposes sexuality. In *Black Girl in Paris*, Eden, very early in her narrative, discusses her “touching games” as a young girl with childhood friend Rosaleen and her brother Anthony.²⁵

I was no stranger to terror . . . When I was thirteen years old and living in Georgia I was in love with a girl in my class named Rosaleen and with her older brother, Anthony. Rosaleen and I played touching games in her bedroom, games she'd learned from her brother. Once when Anthony was home from college he sent Rosaleen downstairs to watch television, and he and I played the touching games . . . My feelings about Rosaleen and Anthony created a confusion in me, a terror of choosing. (Youngblood 6)

Eden's choice to describe these “touching games” and the bombs that constantly explode in Birmingham, AL as forms of terror is key to understanding her confusion about her sexuality and her inability to engage properly in meaningful relationships with either sex later in the novel. Youngblood alludes to child molestation between Anthony and Rosaleen, a blossoming bisexuality or sexual confusion, and a yearning for affection among all three parties. Though

²⁵ Anthony is Eden's first male relationship. She has a sexual relationship with him, but yearns for his sister Rosaleen to whom she is more attracted. Rosaleen is Eden's first love, but she is confused by her feelings for both a man and a woman. This sexual confusion complicates Eden's future relationships.

Eden seems sure that it is Rosaleen, in fact, who she wants to touch her on the inside, it is not exactly clear if this inside refers to the inside of her vagina, which would infer a sexual touching, or if Eden means touching her heart. Either way, this is the first time Eden is aware of an attraction to women.

Later, Eden says, “After Rosaleen and Anthony I was terrified that no one would ever love me again, that desire was a bubble that would burst when I touched it. Years later I met Leo, who loved my body for a while, then left me when I felt I needed him most. A bomb can kill you instantly, love can make you wish you were dead” (Youngblood 6-7). Again, the reader is immediately presented with a violent image of bombs exploding, and Eden’s relationship explodes in much the same way. This is another key difference between Petry’s text and Youngblood’s. The men in the text covet Lutie’s body for sexual gratification. There is no man, outside of young Bub and Pop, who show interest in having a meaningful relationship with Lutie. Meanwhile, Youngblood allows Eden to experience a number of relationships that defy the respectability and sexual politics that confine Lutie. Eden has a sexual interaction with Indego, in exchange for his help. Though it is never an explicit request, Eden expects that Indego is so helpful to her and accommodating because he wants to be intimate with her. “I knew he wanted to make love, but he wanted me to make the first move. He spoke in metaphor and simile about the poetry of love, the passion and experience age brings to a union of love” (Youngblood 54). After this romantic entanglement, Eden is left alone and potentially homeless. Indego leaves Paris, sublets his apartment, and Eden is left once again, at the mercy of Paris. Arguably, Indego uses Eden for her body. Though Eden, too, uses Indego, this is one instance where this character differs from Petry’s character. Lutie never allows the men to use her body or possess her. She briefly considers a relationship with Boots Smith before she realizes that her employment as a

singer will bring no economic relief. Youngblood's Eden is already sexually confused and is less guarded about her body. Though Eden shows gratitude for Indego's help and his friendship, she gives in to his advances in the night because she longs for intimacy. An orphan who racial violence haunts, Eden often feels a lack of closeness to others; whether this is an example of Eden's decision to barter her body or not is left up to interpretation.

Later, when Eden does use her body as a means of financial support, she becomes a modernized Venus Hottentot.²⁶ Since Paris is the place in which Sarah Baartman is on display as a scientific phenomenon—in life and in death—it is important to examine Youngblood's employ of Eden in a similar fashion. In order to make money, Eden agrees to be a live, nude model. Though she detests the idea of posing for money, she sees no other alternative to survive and remain in Paris. Eden's naked body is on display for men to study and draw, but little to no humanity or regard for Eden's personality exudes from the pictures. Eden states, "The sketches I saw of myself made me feel good about my body . . . I was disappointed that the artists hardly ever put details in my face although they captured the density and curl of my pubic hairs, the exact shape of my hardened nipples, and weight of my breasts against gravity" (Youngblood 70). This is one of the first ways Eden's body is used as a form of artistic production. Although her goal is to produce art through words in the way that James Baldwin and Langston Hughes do, she must use her body as a means of financial support until she is able to write. So, while Eden

²⁶ "Sarah Baartman was the most popular and widely circulated stereotype of black female sexuality in early 19th century French culture . . . Baartman went to England in 1810 for the specific purpose of displaying her near-nude 'Hottentot' body in early-nineteenth-century sideshows . . . In 1814, Boer Peter Cexar took Baartman to Paris and sold her to an animal trainer . . . Baartman became the subject of satirical cartoons, including a one-act vaudeville play, *Venus*, written by Suzan-Lori Parks, and most notably a scientific oddity for a panel of French scientists and zoologists in the Jardin du Roi for a three-day conference in March 1815. After her death, instead of burying her body, Georges Cuvier dissected Baartman's body and held the pieces on display for further scientific experimentation, for almost thirty years. After Nelson Mandela rose to the presidency of South Africa in 1994, he made a formal request to repatriate Baartman's remains. Baartman's remains were returned to South Africa for formal burial in 2002" (Tillet 944).

does have some agency, there is no escape from public consumption of her body. Baartman, too, is unable to escape the public prodding and degradation, even in death. Lutie's body makes her desirable to Boots and Junto; their desires are unsatisfied and result in Lutie's violent reaction toward Boots. In Lutie's attempt to maintain agency over her body, she commits murder and has to flee Harlem and abandon her son. While Eden is not displayed in the same fashion as Baartman, her African American body is still the subject of study; men and women study her body and draw its beauty, yet Eden is not the recipient of any of that affection. She is just a specimen.

Even though the majority of Eden's relationships and friendships are fleeting, each one teaches Eden something about herself and about navigating the Parisian landscape. Her relationship with Ving, a white musician, is the only one that works for Eden, but it too has a flaw. Eden is drawn to the sound of Ving's horn before knowing that he is a white man. His music reminds her of home in Georgia.²⁷ Speaking of which, Jones argues, "Ving is the only white person Eden encounters who produces this positive effect. White people, whether southern or not, negatively remind her of home, most especially of the South's racial history but also in the case of the British poet Elizabeth of its regional position as provincial Other to the nation" (48). Although Eden's relationship with Ving is promising, "Youngblood signals that emancipation will not be an easy one . . . Eden becomes rapidly romantically involved with Ving, and Youngblood makes their relationship seem like a perfect match—artistically, culturally, personally, even as regards both his and her androgynous appearance and possible bisexual orientation" (Jones 48). Ving also shares Eden's love and understanding of James Baldwin's creativity and importance. Ving tells Eden, "You got talent . . . but you sound like too

²⁷ Indego is the only other person who brings elements of the American South to Eden in a way that is not negative.

many other people. You've got to make the music yours. Tell your own story with the horn" (Youngblood 160). Here, Eden seems to finally be on track to accomplish her goals of finding love in Paris and finding Baldwin.

Unlike Charlotte Rockefeller, Ving has an understanding and appreciation of Baldwin that is more in accord with Eden's perspective. Ving does not attempt to control Eden or subvert her voice into what society deems respectable writing. But, even in this relationship, the politics of race, class, and sexuality reemerge. Eden says, "I remembered that I was in Paris and there was no one to judge my actions, no one to remind me of my disloyalty to the race, to accuse me of losing my blackness, no one to remind me of the master-slave relationship. I was a free woman and could choose whom and what I wanted" (Youngblood 150). However, Eden gets a very harsh reminder while out walking with Ving one night. A group of men shout at them, "Look at the queer walking his black dog. Salope. Putain. Bitch. Whore" (Youngblood 164). This encounter takes Eden back to that place of racist language that she wanted to escape initially. It also invades her new feeling of emotional and physical security in Paris. Jones writes that this encounter "frightens Eden out of her sexual desire and sends her back to the 'last plantation' out of a need for self-protection" (48). Here, the last plantation is an iteration of Baldwin's from his text *The Fire Next Time*, in which he discusses the social forces responsible for all of his fear and discomfort become internalized.²⁸ Once those terrors are internal, one carries them into every space, whether in the American South or in Paris, France. Eden experiences the same kind of sexual frustration and societal fears that Baldwin experiences. The mind transforms into the last plantation because those exterior terrors are now mentally affecting the ways in which African Americans navigate the landscape. By escaping to the "last

²⁸ Jones is using a phrase that African American journalist and critical race theorist Njerio Itabari coined.

plantation,” more so than any other place in Youngblood’s text, Eden is reminded that there is no escape from the harsh realities of racism, sexual discrimination, respectability politics, and violence. Even though Eden is thousands of miles away from the American South, in the most romantic city in the world, she cannot escape this reality. Youngblood writes,

Those men hadn’t cared that I was American, college-educated, and Christian; all they saw was the color of my skin. Back home, I still wouldn’t be able to hold Ving’s hand without inviting comment or threat. What made me think I could be free? He was a white man, yet he couldn’t protect me here in Paris or any part of the world. What kind of future could we have together? What about our children, if we had any? . . . My sweet high was gone. (165)

This encounter is an abrupt reminder about the implications of being African American and violently thrust upon a white background. The harsh reality that he is both white and possibly queer usurps Eden’s love for Ving. For white society, she is his whore, an animal to mount, then discard. Until this point, Eden is only covertly aware of the racism that Paris has to offer her. However, a real relationship with Ving transports Eden back to the American South, where interracial relationships are unacceptable in many parts of society, whether African American or white. Youngblood also depicts Eden’s horror at the thought of children being born out of their union. They, too, would be subject to this type of verbal abuse. This is not a life that Eden wants in the American South, hence her escape; however, she cannot escape this possibility on the streets of Paris, standing next to her white lover, Ving.

Ving’s marriage proposal, after this incident, suggests that Eden’s race and the opinions of his white peers are of no consequence to him. Jones argues, “Youngblood reminds readers that when black people attempt to flee that ‘last plantation,’ the likelihood is high that not just a white person, but a person of their own race may try to bring them back.”²⁹ Even Haitian Olu-

²⁹ Suzanne Jones discusses ‘the last plantation’ by stating, “through Eden’s encounters with white southerners in Paris, Youngblood illustrates a phenomenon that Baldwin articulated in *The Fire Next Time*, when he wrote that ‘the social forces which menaced me had become interior’ (49-50). Black journalist and critical race theorist Njeri

Christophe, allegedly Ving's best friend, objects to their interracial liaison" (49). Therefore, the novel ends with their relationship status unclear. Arguably, Ving is Eden's equal and her most healthy relationship throughout the novel; however, the implications of respectability, socioeconomic, and sexual polity will not allow this relationship to prosper. Eden abandons the streets of Paris for a small countryside village where she begins to write alone. Eden escapes the harsh American streets, with the hopes of finding her writerly voice and fulfilling relationships; she never finds that on the Parisian streets.

Conclusion

Petry's *The Street* presents Lutie Johnson as an empathetic character. The sexual politics she confronts as a resident of Harlem's 116th Street force her to make life-altering choices for her and her son. Lutie is driven to murder because of the unending need for the men in the novel to possess her body. Even as Petry depicts Boots Smith as Lutie's best opportunity to escape the street and its dangers, it becomes another opportunity for Petry to showcase how patriarchal society largely determines a woman's freedom and economic progression. The street, 116th Street, consumes her son and almost consumes Lutie. At the novel's close, Lutie is left at the mercy of the street once again. Though she never truly needs a lawyer to rescue her son, her failure to understand the justice system prevents Lutie from saving her son from the dangers of the street. Though Lutie never sees Bub again, she understands that he will become a system kid, and he will likely fall into the same lifestyle Lutie fights so hard to escape. Instead, Lutie is forced out of 116th Street. She must flee, without her son. This decision means that another

Itabori has recently named this interior space, the last plantation, arguing that "even as we are victimized by the ethos of slave masters and their descendants, we often define ourselves and operate in terms that speak to the psychological slavery that leaves the mind the last plantation" (Jones 50). The mere fact that Eden is in France, however, literally takes her out of her usual place in southern society, but also out of her black community as well, thereby putting her in a physical position to break the ideological bonds of both (Jones 46).

African American youth is left at the mercy of the street, susceptible to the system of oppression from which Lutie desperately runs.

The community and society fail Lutie and Bub before they ever have a chance to experience life for themselves. Lutie reflects on a conversation she has with her former teacher, saying “She could hear the flat, exasperated voice of the teacher as she looked at the circles Lutie had produced . . . I don’t know why they have us bother to teach your people to write . . . The woman’s statement was correct . . . What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write” (Petry 435). And later, as the novel concludes, “Lutie tried to figure out what twists and turns of fate she had landed on this train . . . All she could think was, it was that street. It was that god-damned street” (Petry 435-436). This final image of Lutie is just as troubling as the scene where she murders Boots Smith. The final scene speaks to the vicious cycle of poverty, despair, and violence that permeates life on the streets in various African American communities. Though these women attempt to escape the respectability politics, the sexual politics, and the socioeconomics politics that plague the street, many of them never really escape. They are just migrating from one street to the next, constantly searching for a freedom and liberation that will likely never come. The reader is left with the eerie feeling that when Lutie disembarks from the train in Chicago; she will live on another street, similar to the one she tries to leave behind in Harlem.

Shay Youngblood’s *Black Girl in Paris* depicts a different type of failed escape. Eden’s street is America’s streets. America’s street is littered not with trash and poverty, but with bombings and hate and the inability for African Americans to be artistically free. Eden’s escape takes her not *just* north, but it takes her to Paris. Eden not only wants to be a writer, but she wants to write like James Baldwin. Though Eden has trouble escaping issues of race, class, and

gender one must also consider how Eden feels inclined to be a writer in the image of James Baldwin. She sacrifices so much to be like a male writer, while having to confront several difficulties of African American womanhood. While Eden thinks about the ways in which men desire her, she ultimately casts those concerns to the side in the interest of becoming a writer like James Baldwin. In casting those things aside in order to be a writer, Eden does not succeed in meeting or becoming James Baldwin. She also does not escape the intersections of race, class, and gender in the Parisian streets. In her mind, she can only be a great writer if she goes to Paris and finds him. In doing so, she will escape social, economic, and artistic confinement. Analyzing Eden's failed escape in terms of how American streets mirror the Parisian streets provides a space for comparative intertextual analysis. For Eden and Lutie, America has an inability to provide solidarity and a separation of public and private space for African American women. The same way Eden must confront issues of respectability politics, socioeconomics, and sexual politics in America, she must also confront these issues as an au pair in Paris. Jones argues, "Although this episodic plot allows *Youngblood* to spotlight the many vicissitudes of a African American female writer as she struggles to find her own voice apart from the constructions of race and gender and region, the novel's form subverts *Youngblood's* dramatization of race relations in France" (50). However, what *Youngblood* does with Eden is to show that despite being in a different country, there is no escape from issue of race, class, and gender. Eden and Lutie could be the same person in two different decades.

The same social conventions that hinder Lutie from prospering in her environment and orphan Bub are the same conventions that complicate Eden's Parisian escape. Though she eventually catches a glimpse of Baldwin on her last day in Paris, what she finds is that she has always been capable of becoming a writer. She did not need to seek out Baldwin in order to

achieve that goal. It is only when Eden stops chasing James Baldwin that she begins to understand how to be the best writer she can be. Eden is incapable of being James Baldwin, and she does not need to be him. She has a voice, and thanks to her experiences and failed escapes from America's street and Paris' street, Eden now has much lived experience from which to draw. Eden set out to escape racism, sexism, and economic struggles. Instead, Paris affords Eden a worldview of global concerns: civil rights in America, immigrant rights in Paris; socioeconomic difficulties in the American south, socioeconomic restrictions on foreigners and immigrants abroad; sexual tensions and confusions in her youth, sexual confusions and relationship difficulties as an adult in Paris.

Finally, placing both Petry's and Youngblood's texts side by side reveals that there are striking similarities and key differences between how these women navigate the urban landscape, while searching for an escape from society's conventions. While *The Street* is frequently a part of academic and critical discussions, Shay Youngblood's *Black Girl in Paris* exists in the margins of critical inquiry and discussion. It is important to continue to engage older texts, while also opening up avenues for newer criticisms of them. At the same time, doing intertextual analyses provides a new method of engaging older texts and invites contemporary authors into critical spaces. Though Youngblood's text spans the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, she offers a fresh interpretation of street literature that forces the reader to take up texts by older authors like Petry or James Baldwin and place them in conversation with the Shay Youngbloods in contemporary African American literature. Doing this will ensure that there is ample critical engagement and artistic production that will pull more texts out of the periphery of academia and towards the center of critical examination. This pairing of two forms of street literature allows us to lay claim to those texts that have been excluded from scholarly consideration. This is

important because it allows for diverse conversations with new texts. It also brings fresh insight to canonical texts like Petry's and allows for more diverse scholarly study.

CHAPTER 3

“WRITING BEYOND ENDINGS”: TONI MORRISON’S *THE BLUEST EYE* (1970) AND SAPHIRE’S *PUSH* (1996)

“Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social—successful courtship, marriage—or judgmental of her sexual and social failure—death. . . . Sometimes the ends of novels were inspirational, sublimating the desire for achievement into a future generation, an end for female quest that was not limited to marriage or death.”-Rachel DuPlessis *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*

“If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything.”-Toni Morrison
“Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”

Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” is a testament to the ways in which Morrison incorporates the community and a sense of lineage into her writing. This is one of the many characteristics that make her writing compelling and timeless. Morrison’s works frequently weave ancestral ties and representations of blackness and womanhood into her characters. For many inside the African American literary tradition, Morrison’s work is more literary and an accurate representation of African American lived experience because of its focus on ancestral ties, community, and lineage. This authenticity is an important aspect of Morrisonian writing; however, there have been texts since *The Bluest Eye* (1970) that have continued along a similar trajectory of community narration, through the eyes of a female protagonist. For example, Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1996) documents the life of Clariecee “Precious” Jones, in the inner city projects of Harlem. This novel is set against the backdrop of the unforgiving streets of Harlem, on the cusp of a burgeoning Hip Hop culture. This culture permeates Precious’ narratives and the local landscape. Precious’ misfortunes are, in many ways,

similar to those that affect Morrison's character Pecola Breedlove. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a central focus of the narrative, though she does not offer direct narration of her emotional, physical, and mental abuse to the reader. Instead, her narrative is filtered through episodic sketches, which other characters narrate. Like Pecola, Precious battles emotional, physical, and mental abuse, from her parents. Yet, the end of Pecola's narrative provides no hope, no outlet for expression, and no real insight to Pecola's emotional state. Pecola's ending is tragic, and that tone is consistent from the beginning of the text to the ending. The ways in which Precious copes with her abuse are distinctly different from how Morrison depicts Pecola's struggles; yet, these novels are very similar though they traverse different decades.

How women writers create characters, particularly those who experience traumas, is not unique. Rather, one can identify similar patterns among twentieth-century women writers. Rachel DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), writes that women writers of the twentieth century "invent a complex of narrative acts with 'psychosocial meanings' . . . writing beyond the ending" (4). Writing beyond the endings means that instead of preconceived notions of what traditionally constitutes a fulfilling ending for a character, authors instead write beyond these psychosocial meanings by creating varying possibilities for characters. For example, instead of consigning women characters to prescribed roles as one dimensional domestics, twentieth century writers began to expand the possibilities for female characters. DuPlessis also argues that "there is a consistent project that unites some twentieth-century women writers across the century, writers who examine how social practices surrounding gender have entered narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women" (4). These narrative statements necessitate a shift in storytelling technique. Instead of

romanticized stories that in no way mirror reality, writers like Morrison place their characters in roles that more closely represent the nuances of African American, female experience, during specific time periods. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes in a post-migratory, blues aesthetic. These narrations reflect how the African American community copes with the urban landscape, post-migration, while passing down an oral history of their families. Women certainly experience love and death, but writing beyond these limitations means to explore all points of lived experiences for women of all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. DuPlessis further interrogates these points in between by saying, “This contradiction between love and quest in plots dealing with women as a narrated group, acutely visible in nineteenth-century fiction, has . . . one main mode of resolution: an ending in which one part of that contradiction, usually quest or *Bildung*, is set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or death” (4). Instead of providing women with only these options, marriage or death, novelists like Morrison utilize the bildungsroman type of storytelling, and incorporate historical events, places, or musical references, which speak to the larger African American community.

DuPlessis examines novels that reject the traditional love, marriage, and death plot progression by writing beyond the ending. Though DuPlessis does not couple Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Sapphire’s *PUSH*, I offer that these two texts do similar work. Morrison’s text is written in the vein of the blues and Sapphire’s text transports the reader into a Hip Hop decade. Morrison’s approach centers community and family, while also centering the abuse and mistreatment black and brown girls can experience, as a result of a destructive family and community. Sapphire’s novel does this as well. Both novels share a similar plot and critical voice, which showcase a critical engagement of the social and economic concerns plaguing the African American community, specifically women in disadvantaged and poverty-stricken areas.

By examining these two texts and applying DuPlessis' framework, I show that street literature and Hip Hop literature can be read critically. Specifically, reading both *The Bluest Eye* and *PUSH* as such allows fresh critical engagement and critique into spaces where it has not been fully accepted before. Elizabeth McNeil, in "Deconstructing the 'Pedagogy of Abuse,'" also notes key similarities and differences between Morrison's and Sapphire's texts. She writes,

PUSH is not the first novel to deal with child sexual abuses, but it is notable . . . in the historical continuum of African American women's fiction . . . Critics and clinicians note that *PUSH*'s point-of-view protagonist, Precious Jones, shows a much more developed sense of agency than does Pecola Breedlove, the silent abused girl at the heart of the key predecessor text, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. (173)

I build upon this existing argument by showing how *The Bluest Eye* is not only a predecessor text to Sapphire's *PUSH*, but also how it is important to note the change in Sapphire's narrative technique. Janice Lee Liddell, in "Agents of Pain and Redemption in Sapphire's *PUSH*" also examines how Sapphire's narrative strategy empowers Precious. She argues, "By giving voice to the victim herself—a phenomenon virtually unheard of in Black sociological, psychological, or imaginative literature—the root causes of the incest are interrogated and the agency of this violence is spread as far as possible" (137).

Sapphire's *PUSH* takes up Morrison's ending and extends it. Sapphire writes beyond Morrison's ending by incorporating specific elements of the literal and figurative street, as a way of examining how the urban landscape, socioeconomic circumstances, and community affect Precious' disposition, and more broadly, women of color. DuPlessis contends that "struggles between middle and ending, quest and love plots, female as hero and female as heroine, class and gender that animate many central novels of the nineteenth century can be posed as the starting point, the motivating inception for the project of twentieth-century women writers" (7). Both Morrison and Sapphire take up the task of writing the experiences of young African American

girls; their narratives incorporate struggles between beginnings and endings and they also address issues of race, class, and gender, as they pertain to women and young girls of color. To do this kind of intersectional writing, whether Morrison names it that or not, is unique to African American writers, women specifically. I prove this by first offering a survey of existing discussions of both *The Bluest Eye* and *PUSH*. Then I provide three ways in which Sapphire writes beyond Morrison's ending, not to produce a better text than Morrison's, but to show how the texts are related and how they offer diverse perspectives of African American, female lived experience. Sapphire writes beyond the ending Morrison provides by 1) incorporating more of the urban landscape and street into the narrative; 2) allowing protagonist Precious to narrate her experiences, unfiltered through another voice or narrator; and 3) by utilizing pertinent elements from Hip Hop culture that are representative of the period and the struggles of other people of color.

Existing Discussions

Brittney Cooper, in "Maybe I'll be a Poet, Rapper: Hip Hop Feminism and Literary Aesthetics is Sapphire's *PUSH*," posits a question of connectivity between literature and blues aesthetics. She actively engages and interrogates the notion of the literary "nexus of jazz and blues" and how African American women writers navigate aesthetics, while they push back against the high art versus low art conversation, currently playing out in academe. She argues that *PUSH*, "acts as a bridge text between earlier generations of African American women's writing and the urban street dramas . . . Sapphire's invocation of Hip Hop is an early portrait of a Hip Hop aesthetic in prose form that offers relevance while avoiding the pitfalls of presentism" (3). And later, "it offers a critical model for the ways in which Hip Hop texts (might) engage with their literary forebears. *PUSH* demonstrates the need for literary works to grapple with the

politics, poetics, and aesthetics of Hip Hop, while remaining connected with these prior works” (3). It is the very notion that a text can, in fact, take up the issues of Hip Hop culture, while bearing the characteristics of the novel, that make this work new and necessary.

Morrison’s text is a staple, *now*, in African American literature, but there was resistance to that text, for many of the same reasons contemporary works, like Sapphire’s *PUSH*, experience backlash. Only recently has Sapphire’s text moved closer to the center of academic engagement. DoVeanna S. Fulton, in “Looking for ‘the Alternative[s]’: Locating Sapphire’s *PUSH* in African American Literary Tradition through Literacy and Orality,” submits that “*PUSH* has not garnered significant scholarly attention because of Sapphire’s portrayal of Precious Jones . . . Sapphire interrogates the mother figure and motherhood in a manner that questions this image and concept in Black community discourse and consciousness” (Fulton 162). Sapphire’s text benefits from a mainstream film adaptation, *Precious*. Until that film’s debut in 2009, very little critical attention, scholarly articles, and academic engagement included the novel *PUSH*. As more attention is paid to this text, it is evident that *PUSH* has much to offer in the way of examining specific aspects of African American girlhood and African American lived experience. Fulton agrees and offers “*PUSH* adopts what might be called canonical traditions and tropes of African American literature, like motherhood, and then uses those tropes to explore contemporary circumstances experienced by some African Americans living in urban communities in the late twentieth century” (163). Today, there is still a desire to suppress these narratives’ academic import; Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* faces the banned book list. There are also instances of schools fighting to omit harsh and vulgar language from texts used in classrooms across the United States. Tessa Roynon, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*, recalls Morrison’s response to *The Bluest Eye*’s initial reception. Morrison remarks,

“in the late 1960s the novel was rejected twelve times before being accepted by a press. It is now, however, widely taught (often causing controversy) in schools and colleges across the world” (22). The thing to note is that it took several attempts, and Morrison’s refusal to accept rejection, for the text to be accepted for publication. It took longer for that text to be an accepted part of many curricula. However, Morrison’s text was not banned because it was not literary; it was banned specifically because of the language and content.³⁰ Moreover, texts deemed problematic, for language choices or subject matter, often find themselves on the periphery of critical engagement, much like contemporary texts like *PUSH*. That same resistance from academia is still occurring inside the African American literary tradition.³¹ One way to eliminate this marginalization is to seek out other texts that follow the Morrisonian design, and it means seeking out contemporary writers who see the value in what Morrison began and who are committed to continuing and expanding this tradition.³²

Sapphire’s *PUSH* serves as a memoir for Precious Jones, in which she confronts a prescribed ending for her life. Though Precious’ narrative is not the first of its kind, it is unique in that it affords the reader the opportunity to experience a double identity. Her story is an example of the narrative pattern DuPlessis mentions. DuPlessis says, “As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal

³⁰ Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* has also faced censorship and banned books lists because of language and content. In “Huck Finn: Controversy Over Removing the ‘N’ Word from Mark Twain’s Novel,” Phillip Rawls and Associated Press discuss the controversy surrounding the novel’s use of “nigger,” and why it was banned.

³¹ Though Morrison’s texts, not usually *The Bluest Eye*, are staples in curriculums, across the nation, there appears to be an arbitrary time period where the courses end. One explanation for this is that it is impossible to cover all of African American literature in one semester. However, there are ways to incorporate more culturally relevant texts into the curriculum. One way is to look for texts like Sapphire’s *PUSH* that are contemporary, yet have similar themes as works like Morrison’s.

³² Here, I mean Morrison’s commitment to community and ancestral ties into her works, as way of ensuring the sustainability of African American storytelling.

and narrative success” (5). As Sapphire’s Precious struggles to find the words to properly articulate her reality, including her sexuality and health, she blends two identities and two worlds: the real, her oppressed and repressed African American body and the imaginative, her slim, white, popular alter ego. In Precious’ reveries, she is able to repress that which oppresses her. During these streams of consciousness, Precious engages in a conversation with herself, through which she talks back, though silently, at first. Her internal streams of consciousness are the only places in which Precious exhibits agency, until she finds the strength to project these internal feelings outward. It is this feature, this internal agency, that sets Precious apart from characters like Pecola Breedlove.

Unlike Morrison’s Pecola, Precious does not resign to accept the environment of which she is a product. Whereas Pecola has vision for how her life could be improved, by having “the bluest eyes,” she does not constantly weave back and forth from reality to fantasy as Precious does. In other words, Morrison constructs an outlet for Pecola that can provide no true happiness in the long term. Pecola’s prayers for blue eyes will never come to fruition, and those fantasies cannot provide Pecola with any agency. In imagining a better life for herself, Pecola’s hopes and dreams rest on an impossibility. This adds to her tragedy. Precious has moments when she unleashes repressed emotion, subconsciously. Pecola is given no such space for reflection and expression. Sapphire’s singular decision to give Precious a voice, though limited at first, is just one place where her novel extends an existing model. There are several characters in each text that contribute to storytelling. For Morrison, Claudia, an African American girl and Pecola’s friend, is the primary vessel of storytelling. That the reader obtains Pecola’s story through both Claudia and the unnamed narrator is limiting. While Claudia, another African American girl narrates Pecola’s experiences, the reader is still left wondering how Pecola interprets and

internalizes her experience. Certainly, Morrison wants to ensure that African American girls are narrating specific lived experiences, instead of allowing one of the men or a white narrator relate this story. But, one must examine what is lost when Pecola's story is mediated instead of being told firsthand in the way Precious relays her experience. Examining these points of departure allows Morrison's and Sapphire's texts to act as links, and it shows how two narrative techniques about similar African American lived experience can usher in diverse ways of thinking about how these rhetorical and narrative strategies work together in different periods.

DuPlessis' work provides the necessary language for articulating the connections made through works, like Morrison's and Sapphire's, across seemingly unrelated periods, in literature. This connection is the perfect place for critical inquiry. There is a connection between the narratives Morrison introduces and the culture out of which these narratives are produced. The thing DuPlessis makes clearest is that some characters' endings are murky. There is no clear indication if and how some characters' conflict might be resolved or if there is a resolution that will satisfy the reader. Oftentimes, Morrison uses these murky endings as opportunities for the reader to bring their thoughts and critical eyes to the text. Pecola's ending is murky, yet there is still much to critique about how her story is told and why Morrison opts to mediate Pecola's voice. Morrison is committed to creating characters whose narratives closely align with her views of community and ancestral lineage. This attention to African American culture, as articulated in speech and writing, is especially important to note. It is through this that readers glean insight into the music, atmosphere, and essence of blackness. Because it is important to Morrison, her texts embody this characteristic, presenting readers with varying vantage points, through which to learn about a people and culture, by traveling through historical periods and cultural moments, in African American history.

Since Morrison is especially attuned to the readers' ability to experience a character's history and past, firsthand, she also writes in a way that forces the reader to become absorbed in her novels. Furman speaks to this when he comments, "And like black music her stories should, Morrison continues, solicit a dynamic response. By avoiding adverbs and by allowing the reader to interpret character and incident, Morrison encourages participatory reading" (4-5). Roynon also addresses the musicality involved in Morrison's title and her text. "The 'bluest' also connotes the blues, an original African American musical form that expresses both suffering and survival at its core. The blues migrated from the rural South to the urban North along with the many thousands of black people who are the historical counterparts to Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline" (17). When migration occurred African American people brought their histories and their music with them, into these African American meccas. Pecola is the offspring of migrant parents, who is also the recipient of both Cholly's and Pauline's blues. The sadness of Pecola's story reverberates across the pages of this text.

Though Pecola's story is a particular kind of blues, in itself, Claudia and the MacTeers are also living a version of this blues, Pecola's blues, and the general blues of being poor in an urban space. Claudia's job as narrator is to put together the pieces of this sad summer, in Lorain, Ohio. However, since the abuse does not happen to Claudia, one wonders why Pecola is not allowed the space to relate her story. McNeil also ponders Morrison's narrative techniques and how they affect the readers' engagement with Pecola. McNeil writes,

whereas Precious articulates her abuse story from the first sentence of the novel, Pecola's story is only told by others. Pecola remains silent and thus disembodied in terms of realizing/confronting and integrating the abuse so that she can complete it, grow past it, and create a future for herself. This is also a reflection of the social context Morrison critiques—both the story's 1940s setting and late 1960s era during which she wrote *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison's account reflects an earlier predilection in predominantly white American literature for disallowing

the “ruined” girl and progeny to taint society by being integrated into it. (McNeil 176)

By stripping Pecola of her agency, Morrison compounds Pecola’s blues, and she makes her a mute, flat character that must rely on other characters to narrate her experience. McNeil also contends that *PUSH* reveals a greater sense of agency and that “PUSH affords the reader an even greater possibility . . . to respond and react to Sapphire’s more complex understanding of that lived experience. The specific ways that Sapphire creates a more intimate and relevant incest story include the unusual mother-daughter incest and Precious’s confusing sexual responses” (176). While it is important that Morrison allows another young African American girl to narrate Pecola’s story instead of a male voice or a non-African American voice, she still does not permit Pecola to narrate her story. This is key to understanding the ways in which Morrison’s narrative technique differs from Sapphire’s narrative technique. In *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (1994), Morrison comments, “It’s not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotion . . . even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it” (Taylor-Guthrie 164). These holes and spaces are evident throughout Pecola’s progression. There is no place for her to express anything instead the reader must come into the text and interpret Claudia’s narration of Pecola’s experience. It is as if Pecola is unable to vocalize her pain, so Morrison places the agency in Claudia’s possession. Though this move allows the reader to “come into the story,” it does not afford the reader a first-hand, unfiltered narrative. The reader can bring to the text many emotions and thoughtful analyses of the Breedloves’ and the MacTeers’ circumstances, yet it is impossible to know, without a doubt, what Pecola is thinking. This is one hole that cannot be filled with reader emotions and speculation. While the reader will never get that account,

DuPlessis provides a bridge for potentially understanding the narrative process for women writers in the twentieth century.

If one were to take up Sapphire's *PUSH* and examine it in the same fashion as Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, there emerges a chance to continue, or extend, an existing narrative, but with a much less murky conclusion. There is a satisfaction in knowing that Precious experiences several kinds of abuse, yet she still fights for literary, economic independence, and stability. It provides hope that her experiences will not be in vain. Precious has the opportunity to be a better example for her children. It is important that readers understand how Morrison constructs her characters because they do more than tell a story. Furman suggests that "Morrison's characters (and her readers with them) are brought to the edge of endurance and then asked to endure more; sometimes they crack. Under these conditions Morrison shows what extraordinary and unspeakable acts ordinary people are capable of committing" (5). An example of this occurs in *The Bluest Eye*, with Cholly Breedlove's rape of his daughter, Pecola. Pecola is only twelve years old, but somehow almost everyone in the novel victimizes her. The abuse starts with her father, but her mother offers no solace or nurturing.

Claudia opens the novel, "Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too" paints a dark, despondent picture for what is to come in the novel (Morrison 3). The end of the novel is clear in the beginning. Roynon contends that Morrison's ending does little to bring any positivity or hope for any of the characters in the novel. This is where DuPlessis' critique about endings is most useful. Pecola's and Claudia's innocence is dead, not delayed, or lost, but dead. I argue that Sapphire takes up Morrison's seemingly bleak ending, and re-incarnates Pecola, years later, in Precious. By doing so, she provides an alternative to the dreary outlook Claudia describes. It is important to note that

Sapphire does much to this familiar character by positing her in a different environment. There are more opportunities for women, even those who live in poverty. While some may see Pecola's ending as not completely hopeful, others find her ending negative and murky. For example, Roynon highlights a singular point of conjecture amongst critics of Morrison's text. She writes,

Critics are divided about just how negative the ending of the novel is. Pecola is unequivocally destroyed; as Claudia says, 'The damage done was total' (Morrison 162). And aside from the experiences of the central victim the presence of characters such as Mr. Henry creates a picture of a threatening world in which all children are vulnerable to sexual and other violence. (21-22)

To use the word "destroyed" here to describe Pecola is to strip her completely of any potential to transcend the tragedies of her young life. Though Claudia's early dialogue details a kind of destructive damage, the novel's ending only compounds this destruction. Moreover, if the abuse Pecola suffers is not enough, Claudia brings Mr. Henry's questionable, perverted behavior back to the forefront. The reader, instead of getting to experience a new beginning with Pecola, is left with an ending that is both dismal and a little too unresolved. Arguably, Morrison's ending does not leave complex characters with an unrealistic view of life after poverty and childhood abuse. Instead, from the beginning, she presents a particular kind of tragedy. This tragedy cannot be whitewashed or glossed over, neither in Morrison's fiction nor in real life.

Writing Beyond the Urban Landscape

For Morrison and Trudier Harris, folk communities are essential to understanding the communal aspects of post-migratory realities for African Americans. Moreover, migration to urban meccas in the North yielded a false promise of security, prosperity, and success. Harris argues, "instead of simply including isolated terms of folklore, Morrison manages to simulate the ethos of folk communities, to saturate her novels with a folk aura intrinsic to the texturing of whole" (Furman 4). It is this connection to community and ancestral heritage that transports the

reader into the landscape, so that they can live these experiences, through the eyes of the characters. What the Breedloves experience is the harsh poverty, blackness, and lack of private space that promotes security, prosperity, and success. Yet, the folk aura and bluesyness are still encapsulated within this community, in the midst of tragedy and violence, as opposed to decades of violence and cultural lynching, as a result of racism and discrimination. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's rape and pregnancy is the central blues of the text. Each character sketch adds to the larger issue of Pecola's abuse. Her tragic story is the driving force across the text. On the other hand, in *PUSH*, the central focus is not necessarily the abuse Precious faces, but how the environment and the urban landscape are contributing factors to the abuses Precious suffers. Moreover, Sapphire shows how the same environment aids Precious in surviving the harsh environment. The ways in which Morrison and Sapphire address these concepts are what sets them apart from other writers.

Claudia's blunt honesty resurfaces throughout, revealing more about certain minor characters and their effect on Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda. The difference between these characters, and so many others, is that they are born out of two-parent households. For instance, Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, though estranged, have a firm backstory that Morrison shares with the readers. The unidentified, omniscient narrator provides the reader with a picturesque beginning for the Breedloves. They "agreed to marry and go way up north, where Cholly said steel mills were beggin for workers. Young, loving, and full of energy, they came to Lorain, Ohio. Cholly found work in the steel mills right away, and Pauline started keeping house" (116). This allusion to the mass migration of African Americans from the South is Morrison's way of connecting the characters and the community to a place. African American people are literally crowding the streets, driving, busing, and walking towards the North and the

promise of better jobs. Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, in *Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900-1930*, explore the complex reasons for African American flight, specifically the racial violence that drives African Americans out of the South. Since large numbers of African American people migrate northward, their work specifically focuses on migration after 1900. They assert, “the explanations for the Great Migration can be divided, crudely, into economic and social forces” (Tolnay and Beck 351-352). Even after Emancipation, African Americans continue to experience economic hardship; sharecropping, though appealing to some African Americans, is not the ultimate goal for many families. Additionally, Emancipation obliterates the master-slave hierarchy, which demands that both African American and white people cope with limited job opportunities and growth potential. Tolnay and Beck call this “split labor markets.” This unbalanced market offers little to no space for African Americans to prosper. As a result, more conflict arises between poor whites, poor African Americans, former landowners, and new landowners.

Morrison’s unidentified narrator already informs the reader that there are several families, including the Breedloves and possibly the MacTeers, who have migrated to Lorain, Ohio, from the South. One of the reasons African Americans are migrating from the South in large droves is because of growing racial violence, like the lynching epidemic, and a lack of socioeconomic freedom and employment opportunities. Claudia’s description of Maureen Peal is one of the most informative moments in the text. Although Maureen is African American, she is clearly from an affluent family, which makes her the envy of all of the other girls in school. More importantly, she seems to be immune to the kind of teasing and bullying to which Pecola falls victim. Claudia’s jealousy of Maureen Peal is multi-layered. She hates her, yet she and her sister would be her friend, should she allow them to do so. Claudia describes this possibility as a

“dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border patterns of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her. And when I thought of the unearned haughtiness in her eyes, I plotted the accidental slammings of locker doors on her hand” (Morrison 63). This detailed description of Claudia’s envy and rage for Maureen is indicative of both an internal disapproval of Maureen and of Claudia’s frustration with the Maureens of the world. However, the detailed description Morrison provides, through Claudia, is telling. Claudia describes Maureen as a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes . . . She was rich . . . as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care . . . There was a hint of spring in her green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk” (62). Here, Morrison is very particular with how Maureen is constructed. Her long, lynch rope hair is both mythical and an allusion to the violence in the South from which Cholly and Pauline migrate. To add to the compounding image of race and class disjuncture, Morrison evokes a strong image of southern hate with Claudia’s commentary about Maureen. Maureen’s presence places her on a pedestal that is unreachable, even from petty school yard taunting. Claudia alludes to Maureen’s power by saying,

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her . . . white boys didn’t trip her . . . white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk. (63)

Claudia’s awareness of Maureen’s privilege is linked to Claudia’s critical examinations of her environment and how she and Maureen come from different backgrounds. Claudia’s narration and attitudes toward Maureen set up a landscape that class separation and economic status still

affect. Although Claudia is not abused like Pecola, she does have a critical eye toward how race, class, and social status affect her and her family. While Claudia never vocalizes her frustrations with Maureen or her jealousy of her, she does reflect internally. Claudia's attention to how Maureen is not subjected to the harshness of the urban landscape in the way that the MacTeers and the Breedloves are is an early indicator of Claudia's strong narrative voice.

While the South attempts to rebuild its landscape, its social dynamics remain in disarray. Migration to the North, then, promises to be a chance to start over. Morrison captures that south to north migration in Cholly and Pauline's backstory. As a result, place emerges as a key marker of both Morrison's novel and Sapphire's novel. Examining how African Americans navigate the streets of the South and the North, across different aesthetics, is critical to understanding the themes, characters, and their narratives. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove's plan is to stake his claim in the industrialized Northern steel mills. That promise is the same spark that caused African Americans to flock to these cities. Morrison does not explicitly state that the South is inundated with lynching, but African American people are determining a plan for survival after Reconstruction and surmounting violence against African American people. These characters simply reveal their backstory, over the course of unraveling the narratives of other characters, particularly Claudia's reiteration of Pecola's tragedy. The appeal of Northern cities, for Cholly, is much more appealing than the degradation and poverty that the South offers. So, they migrate. Pauline's description of the northern reality details a different landscape. Pauline recalls,

Me and Cholly was getting along good then. We came up north; supposed to be more jobs and all . . . I don't know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful, but they didn't come around too much . . . Up north they was everywhere—next door, downstairs, all over the streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness.

They could make you feel no-count, 'cept I didn't expect it from them. That was the loneliest time of my life. (Morrison 117)

Here, Morrison highlights a class division that compounds the distance between the Breedloves and their new environment. Although Cholly and Pauline changed their environment by migrating to the North, they did not change their economic situation. The landscape of the South is filled with racial tension and economic struggle for African Americans, so a large number migrate to the North. Morrison's story highlights both the similarities and the differences in the two landscapes. Poverty in the South becomes poverty in the North. The Breedloves also face a class distinction that separates them from other African Americans because of economic stability. The stresses of the urban landscape manifest violently in Cholly and Pauline's relationship.

Sapphire writes beyond Morrison's urban landscape in the way she uses people, music, and cultural references as backdrops for Precious' experiences. For Precious, the landscape is not a part of migration, but it influences how she reacts to certain stimuli. One of these places involves Precious running out of a restaurant after stealing chicken. Precious runs down the streets as crack addicts taunt her in the street. The text states, "Scarf Big Mama!" this from crack addict standing in front abandoned building. I don't even turn my head—crack addicts is *disgusting!* Give race a bad name, lost in the hells of norf america crack addicts is" (Sapphire 37). This is one of the many places in which Sapphire incorporates the physical street into the narrative. Not only is Precious in a poor neighborhood, rife with tenements and cramped living quarters, she is confronted with the reality of the crack epidemic in Harlem. One of the things that makes her situation so relatable is that the landscape is also a minor character. Precious comments on the things happening outside of her building, as a way of painting a picture her audience can understand. Sapphire shows the physical street and its inhabitants. Noting the crack

addicts on the corner is key because during the crack cocaine epidemic the streets are littered with things and people. Precious is running away from a restaurant from which she has stolen food, but she also runs away from the negative influences on the street. It is also interesting how the crack addicts disgust Precious as they hang on the corner, yet Precious is a food thief. Sapphire parallels Precious' environment with her decision making to illustrate how Precious is forced to literally run through the streets after stealing food because she has no money. In this instance, Precious is forced to choose between being hungry or stealing food for herself and her unborn baby. The decision Precious makes is an impossible one, but as she takes flight, she is also highly critical of the environment as she flees.

Writing Beyond Self-Esteem and Abuse

Sapphire has a way of giving Precious a critical eye, in a way that Morrison's Pecola is limited. However, Morrison's Claudia is not limited in her narration. In fact, Claudia's vantage point is extremely critical. One must wonder if Morrison chooses to have Claudia narrate and critique these experiences because she does not also carry the abuse that Pecola carries. In all of the other places in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia comments on impossible standards of white beauty, poverty, economically disadvantaged groups, women's bodies, and even child molestation. Though Claudia clearly resists the blue eyed, blonde haired standard of beauty, she still acknowledges Maureen's beauty, even if she resents her and Shirley Temple for their beauty and society's fascination with it. Geraldine is also enamored with an ideal of beauty as she equates beauty with cleanliness. When Pecola visits Geraldine and her appearance is a stark contrast to this overarching model of beauty and cleanliness, Geraldine reacts violently toward her. Roynon contends that "Geraldine is typical of a certain class of pale-skinned young African American women who expend all of their energy trying to eradicate 'the dreadful funkiness of passion, the

funkiness of nature’...She exemplifies intra-racial discrimination at its most its most insidious” (19). Here, Roynton highlights the height of Pecola’s agony. Geraldine insults Pecola and reminds her of both her appearance and her worth, through society’s eyes. Geraldine looks at Pecola and sees “the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted...muddy shoes...soiled socks...the safety pin holding the hem of the dress...” (Morrison 91-92). And, while looking at Pecola, Geraldine sees an entire group of people. Instead of seeing a poor, African American girl who is being abused, Geraldine sees her economic status and her uncleanliness. Geraldine continues, “They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds . . . crowded into church pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children” (Morrison 92). Here, Geraldine’s condescension points to a larger dynamic of colorism between dark skinned African Americans and fair skinned African Americans. It is not enough that Pecola is poor and deemed unattractive. It is not enough that her family cannot provide love and support. She also must face ridicule from the Geraldines and Maureens of the world.

Finally, the scene ends with Geraldine calling Pecola a “nasty little black bitch” and throwing her out of her house. For Pecola, the “pretty milk-brown lady” is just another reminder that she is unwanted and unloved (Morrison 92). However, Morrison does not provide the reader with Pecola’s insight. The reader must examine the scene and bring to the text emotion and frustration. Though it is quite likely that Geraldine’s actions hurt Pecola, readers cannot know that for sure. By not affording Pecola a chance to vocalize her anger or frustration, Morrison does not choose to give Pecola narrative authority. Additionally, as McNeil states, there is no room for Pecola to vocalize her abuse, grow through this abuse, then move past the abuse. As indicative of the time period as this text is, Morrison’s narrative technique provides little

recourse for Pecola, making her a permanently tragic character. What makes Morrison's rendering of child incest and abuse realistic is that in the late 40s and 50s, it is likely that Pecola's story would be kept secret. Claudia's purpose as the critical eye is to expose those secrets in a way that explains what has occurred, but also placing into context the very loud silence surrounding Pecola's abuse. By allowing Precious to have the voice that Morrison suppresses in Pecola, Sapphire's Precious has a testimony. She experiences horrific abuse, fights for survival, for herself and her children, and takes steps to ensure that her children have a future, free of the emotional, mental, and physical abuse she experiences. Unlike Pecola, the reader finds more common ground with Precious because she has the opportunity to express her sorrow and discontentment, as the reader champions her on the journey. Precious is determined to fight against internal conflicts and external conflicts.

Instead of Sapphire following Morrison's lead with one victim and a separate narrator, Sapphire merges the two and allows Precious the agency to be both victim and victor as she speaks for herself. Though Precious understands her father's actions are wrong, she eventually articulates that in her notebook and to her mother. After declaring that the abuse she suffers is not her fault, Precious begins to understand her worth, and that her voice matters. This is clear after Precious meets Ms. Rain for the first time. Her appearance is both startling and intriguing. Precious comments, "My muver do not like niggers wear they hair like that! My muver say Farrakhan OK but he done gone too far...I don't know how *I* feel about people with hair like that" (Sapphire 40). This is one of many instances where Precious shows signs of independence. Here, it is the potential for having a different opinion about people who wear dreadlocks or the importance of school and this RISE program. Though both parents have abused her, she is still determined to think for herself, if only for herself. Further, Precious may not voice these

opinions, particularly not to her mother, but the notion that she has these thoughts, that she is an individual with thoughts and feelings, is an extension. Pecola is still very young. Her only place to see and experience diverse modes of thinking and experience is the home of the prostitutes.

Sapphire's dreamlike sequence can be read as an extension of Morrison's Maureen. When Precious daydreams, she wafts in and out of a self-realized critique of herself. Precious has the ability to view herself as attractive, desirable, but she is also cursed with the harsh reality of how society views her. It is helpful for readers that other characters in the text are thinking about Pecola and her pain, but what is missing is Pecola's voice. Claudia's voice, though strong and critical, is not a sufficient substitute for Pecola's voice. If only the reader were invited into Pecola's dream, in a realistic fashion where she strives for more than blue eyes, then perhaps the reader would have a better idea about how Pecola is processing her pain. Sapphire affords Precious this space to cope with and grow through her pain. Precious vacillates between internal and external thoughts until she is confident enough in her voice to speak out against those who oppress her. However, this is both a gift and a curse for Precious. While she experiences abuse and neglect at home, she often is able to slip into an introverted space of clarity, though fleeting.

This introverted space, in which Precious articulates her innermost thoughts and feelings, is both reflective and condemning. Precious comments, "I look at myself in the window of the fried chicken joint between 127th and 126th. I look good in my pink stretch pants. Woman at Lane Bryant on one-two-five say no reason big girls can't wear the latest, so I wear it. But boyz still laff me, what could I wear that boyz don't laff" (Sapphire 37). Here, Precious is immediately made conscious of her size and the boys still make fun of her, even though she is wearing the latest designs from a popular designer. In a few moments, Precious goes from being confident in her appearance, to wondering what she could wear or do to stop the boys from laughing at her.

Like Precious, Pecola is also familiar with the taunts and jests of the boys, and girls, in her class. She cannot seem to escape their bullying. Pecola is also highly sensitive about her appearance. For example, the boys in school surround Pecola and chant, “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadadddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . . They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence” (Morrison 65). These words are just one moment out of Pecola’s life. These boys look at her dark skin, and they equate it with ugliness. Arguably, these taunts can be seen as classic schoolyard “dozens,” but Morrison uses this as a way of showing how Pecola is victimized repeatedly.³³ Though Pecola thinks she is ugly, Precious has a certain level of confidence about her appearance. It is only when the boys laugh at her that she questions herself.

The similarities in these taunts in both *The Bluest Eye* and *PUSH* are indicative of the difficulties young African American girls face in regard to their appearance. For Claudia, Maureen’s appearance is upsetting, not because she is unattractive, but because of the privilege that she enjoys as a result. Claudia and Frieda hate Maureen because she represents all of the things that they do not have. Her wealth, her skin, and even her lynch rope hair, set her apart from the rest of the African Americans in the town and school. Claudia describes their interaction as a “dangerous friendship,” and wants to “kick her.” This is a visceral, premeditated reaction to Maureen. So, one must ponder why Claudia would still be her friend. Moreover, Claudia does not intervene on Pecola’s behalf; Frieda intervenes. Claudia observes Maureen and Pecola’s newly formed camaraderie with envy. After the altercation with the boys, Maureen is

³³ The “dozens” refers to a game where people take turns telling jokes about each other. Though it is just a game, the subject matter is often about one’s appearance and family, particularly the mother.

nice to Pecola and buys her ice cream, much to Claudia's and Frieda's surprise. In an instant, Pecola has a bond with Maureen that Claudia and Frieda have not been able to form.

At one point, Maureen, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola are discussing who has seen their father naked. The girls' conversations frustrate Maureen because she has no idea why they seem to revolve around "boys, babies, and naked daddies" (Morrison 71-72). The way Morrison constructs this scene is reminiscent of a group of girls playing the dozens on a schoolyard. The only difference is that the girls have seen and heard far more about these topics than anyone wants to admit. As Pecola grows increasingly nervous about the direction of the conversation, the reader is granted a glimpse into her psyche, when she shouts, "I never saw my daddy naked. Never" (Morrison 72). "Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears. . . . Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (Morrison 73). Here, instead of adamantly defending her abused sensitivity, she retreats into her broken shell. Though Claudia and Frieda are aware of the sensitivity of this conversation topic, Pecola is embarrassed, but Morrison does not allow her to vocalize any emotion, other than to fold into herself. Pecola is clearly reliving her abuse, but she does so internally. No one, not even the reader, is privy to her thoughts, experiences, or her reactions at participating in a discussion involving naked daddies. Instead of participating in the conversation, Pecola is silent. This is another opportunity where the reader has to rely on Claudia to interpret the emotions or lack thereof running through Pecola's body. It is limiting and inadequate when trying to understand Pecola because the reader desperately needs to hear Pecola's thoughts. This absence of Pecola's point of view, either for fear of embarrassment over the reality of her father's abuse, or from sheer inability to locate the

language to properly articulate these feelings, is a gaping hole. Sapphire's way of allowing Precious to sort through her feelings internally is an extension.

Precious' way of escaping the harshness of her reality is daydreaming about her perfect life, in which she completely recreates herself, starting with her appearance. During her narrative, there are times when Precious is having a conversation with herself. Though the reader is granted access to Precious' thoughts, Precious is unable to vocalize those thoughts to the people who abuse her. She proclaims, "I wanna say I am somebody. I wanna say it on subway, TV, movie, LOUD. I see the pink faces in suits look over top of my head. I watch myself disappear in their eyes, their tesses. I talk loud but still I don't exist" (Sapphire 31). This state of being unseen is also found in Morrison's text. Pecola experiences this when she goes to Mr. Yacobowski's store. "Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover . . . He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see . . . How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper . . . *see* a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary" (Morrison 48). Here, Pecola is visibly invisible. Precious, in *PUSH*, alludes to the same kind of invisibility. She says,

I see it over and over, the real people, the people who show up when the picture come back . . . they are pretty people, girls with little titties like buttons and legs like long white straws. Do all white people look like pictures? . . . Why can't I see myself, *feel* where I end and begin. I sometimes look in the pink people in suits eyes . . . and they look way above me, put me out of their eyes. My fahver don't see me really. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a *real* person, inside. (Sapphire 31-32)

The invisibility that Precious articulates is an extension of what Pecola experiences in *The Bluest Eye*. For example, Pecola thinks "if her eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different . . . if she

looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say . . . we mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (Morrison 46). This is another example of how Sapphire's text is an extension, or continued ending, of Morrison's text. Though Morrison and Sapphire are writing in different periods, they both offer commentary on the invisibility young African American girls experience as a result of a society that is unable or unwilling to see them. Pecola's solution for becoming visible is to be divinely transplanted with blue eyes that will shield her from bad things. She believes that only blue eyes can save her. At the root of this rationale is the clear difference in how white girls and African American girls grow up in Lorain, Ohio. Because achieving blue eyes is impossible, Pecola will never get a happy ending. She will continue to see things with her African American eyes, and never get her miracle ending.

And later, "each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope . . . thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (Morrison 46-47). Blue eyes are Pecola's only hope to stop or prevent bad things from happening in front of her and to her. Though Morrison does not explicitly state what Pecola has seen transpire, the reader is able to use his or her imagination. Because the Breedloves are poor, there is a lack of private space. This lack of private space is symptomatic of a particular level of socioeconomic discomfort that exists in Northern communities. While Claudia alludes to Pecola's abuse, she suggests that Pecola has seen Cholly and Pauline engage in a behavior that is inappropriate for children's, or Pecola's, eyes.

Whereas Pecola's relief is blue eyes, Precious gets a reprieve through her subconscious. Just as quickly as Precious laments her situation, she also has the ability to see herself, if only for a few moments. Suddenly Precious has a moment of clarity where she puts those toxic thoughts out of her head. She exclaims, "But I don't care now what anybody see. I see something, somebody. I got baby. So what. I feel proud 'cept it's baby by my fahver and that make me not in picture again" (Sapphire 33). Here, Sapphire uses Precious to show the internal battles that girls face when trying to confront body image, self-esteem, and abuse. Precious has a voice that is pushing back against those people in her environment, both inside the school system and on the streets, who want to box her into a small, limiting space. Precious goes inside her own mind, having a kind of diatribe with herself. It is as if she can only confront and refute their opinions, internally. She compares herself to the white people in suits and white little girls because these are the "real" people. For Precious, real means that those people, and only those people, have opportunities to advance. Though Sapphire does not give Precious the vocabulary to articulate white privilege, this is exactly what Precious is describing. White privilege is the reason little white girls, as Precious understands, are not impregnated by their fathers. She wants so badly for her father to see her, both literally and figuratively. If he could only see her, deep inside, as a real person, like a white girl, then he would not have raped her, as a toddler and impregnated her, twice. It is this fact that keeps Precious out of the picture, again. Seemingly, once Precious convinces herself that she is worthy and she is somebody, she has to confront her father's rapes which leave her with two children.

Sapphire's writing beyond Morrison's ending also nuances the ways in which readers witness and understand sexual abuse. Not only does Precious endure abuse from her father, she also endures abuse from her mother. In between Precious' lapses from dreamland to reality, she

recounts her abuse, from age seven. She says, “Seven, he on me almost every night. First it’s just in my mouth. Then it’s more. He is intercouraging me. Say I can take it. Look you don’t even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I’m *seven*” (Sapphire 39). These descriptions are lucid, raw recollections of child abuse. Though Precious’ father is saying anything to excuse his behavior, young Precious knows the act is wrong. Similar to Pecola’s abuse from Cholly, in a small space, Precious also has a story of abuse from her father, but Sapphire’s narrative extends the story of abuse, by assigning both parents as abusers. In *The Bluest Eye*, the reader largely gets Pecola’s story through Claudia’s perspective and through an unidentified narrator. By re-centering Precious’ voice, Sapphire allows the reader to experience her story from a firsthand perspective. Precious is unable to articulate her pain to her oppressors, but when she reverts into her silent shell, her subconscious does all of the speaking she is unable to do. Precious laments, “Sometimes I wish I was not alive. But I don’t know how to die” (Sapphire 32). And later, “Second grade my cherry busted. I don’t want to think that now” (Sapphire 36). The administrators at Precious’ school do not hear these words; those who bully Precious ignore these words. Still, Precious invites the reader inside her abusive history.

Sapphire’s narrative design also provides critiques of controlling images of African American women in the media and society. Through Precious’ narrative, readers also experience a critique of stereotypes for young African American mothers. For example, Precious adamantly speaks out against relying on welfare to support her children and herself. Precious does not denounce government assistance; instead, she considers the larger implications for relying on a system that seeks to oppress African American women. She speaks out against this even though it puts her in direct conflict with her mother. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), talks at length about

common controlling images of African American women in the media. One of these controlling images is the welfare mother. She writes, “a third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—appears tied to working-class Black women’s increasing access to U.S. welfare state entitlements” (78). And later,

At its core, the image of the welfare mother constitutes a class-specific, controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law. As long as poor Black women were denied social welfare benefits, there was no need for this stereotype. But when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, the need arose for this controlling image. (78)

As African American women begin to make strides in their impoverished environments, they also acquire a negative stereotype. This stereotype, the lazy, uneducated, African American woman, is damaging and inaccurate, and it contributes to controlling images of African American women in the media. In addition to being labeled lazy and uneducated, this welfare queen stereotype also puts undue scrutiny and restrictive language around African American women’s right to reproduce. Collins contends, “Controlling Black women’s fertility in this political and economic context became important to elite groups. The image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not white and middle class” (79). Precious understands how society views welfare. Her mother fully embodies this stereotype with her constant prodding for Precious to sign up for welfare, instead of plodding her way through school. Precious, mother of one special needs child and pregnant with her second child, is in real danger of becoming another welfare queen statistic. However, Sapphire disallows Precious to be complacent with becoming a welfare queen. Collins provides a clear description of the welfare queen by saying,

The image of the welfare mother provides ideological justifications for intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. African Americans can be racially stereotyped as being lazy by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to

pass on the work ethic. Moreover, the welfare mother has no male authority figure to assist her. Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of white, male-dominated ideology: She is a woman alone. (79)

Though Precious has no male authority figure, she is able to dream past her current circumstances. The abuse she has endured has not usurped all of the hope Precious holds for her children. She is unmarried, but Precious' children are the products of rape. There was no way for her to prepare a better life for these children. Since Precious' mother typifies the welfare queen, it is Precious' desire to escape that cycle. Precious states, "My muver want me to go get on welfare. But I'm on welfare—hers . . . I know she ain't gonna get money for me I ain' in school; she gonna always get money for my daughter 'cause she retarded . . . But I don't know if I want check. I wonder what reading books be like" (Sapphire 51). This refutation of a pre-existing stereotype is another way Sapphire extends an existing model. Precious is desperately fighting for a different life than the one she has led up to this point. As she alludes, it would quite easy for her to take the easy way out. She could continue to rely on government assistance to support her or she can strive to become literate.

By choosing literacy, instead of welfare, Precious refutes the notion that she is a welfare queen who is only good for breeding children and waiting for someone else to provide for them. She also rejects the notion that she will ultimately become a welfare mother. It is important for Sapphire to include this refutation of this controlling image of women in the media. Moreover, Precious is stepping outside of her mother's shadow to prove that there is another way to survive. This new path may not be the easiest path, considering the abuse she already faces from her mother. Yet, Precious vocalizes, still internally, that she does not want the life that society prescribes for her.

Other Underrepresented Groups

Finally, Sapphire writes beyond Morrison's ending by incorporating pertinent elements from the Hip Hop culture that are representative of the decade and the struggles of other people of color. Morrison's text provides an array of characters, in Lorain, Ohio. These characters are mostly African American, except for the brief introductions to minor characters in the community. Since community building and the incorporation of communal voices are central to Morrison's writings, it is understandable that *The Bluest Eye* focuses largely on those narratives. However, Sapphire makes a prudent decision to incorporate other voices, both women of color and of different gender identities. These representations reflect the diverse representations in Precious' environment and in Hip Hop culture. For example, Precious recalls, "A big redbone girl, loud bug-out girl who find my notebook at chicken place, Spanish girl with light skin, then this brown-skin Spanish girl with light skin, and a girl my color in boy suit, look like some kinda butch" (Sapphire 43). And later, "The skinny Spanish girl speak, 'My name is Rita Romero. I was born right here in Harlem. I'm here because I was an addict and dropped out of school'" (44). Here, Precious is interpreting the physical differences between herself and the other students, and she recognizes that each student has some kind of issue, much like Precious. The reader is privy to these girls' stories and Precious' perception of their circumstances. Since Precious has experienced her share of tortuous, emotional upheaval and abuse, it is equally enlightening to see a different set of experiences from other women, in the same environment. This shows the reader that within this small, crowded, space, there are multi-layered traumas represented in each of these women's narratives. Sapphire brings these issues to a common place, this place being an educational safe haven, not readily available in other texts. Pecola Breedlove, for example, has no such place to turn.

PUSH's diversity is not just about color; Sapphire's method of writing beyond Morrison's ending includes different sexualities and identities, as Miss Rain is a lesbian African American woman, and Precious' narrative also includes a transgender male, Jermaine. Precious states, "Jermaine say she was born in the Bronx, still live there. Red her favorite color . . . She come here 'cause she want to get away from negative influence of the Bronx" (45). Just as quickly as Precious processes that there is a girl in her class who wants to be called Jermaine, she also provides the reader with a glimpse into Jermaine's experience in the Bronx. Though she provides little detail, it is clear that the atmosphere in the Bronx is one that Jermaine wants to escape, so he seeks out an educational literacy program as a vehicle out of that environment. The same is the case with Rhonda and Consuela Montenegro. Rhonda tells the class she was "born in King's County Hospital . . . moved to Harlem at age nine . . . here to get a G.E.D.," and she is already involved in the music industry (Sapphire 45). Consuelo Montenegro does not offer much about why she is in the program, but Precious notes her appearance and ethnicity. She comments, "Ooohhh she pretty Spanish girl, coffee-cream color wit long ol' good hair" (Sapphire 45). These descriptions are important because it shows Sapphire deliberately weaving in the narratives of other minorities. She does this because it is necessary to incorporate these voices; they shape how Precious reacts to stimuli in different settings. This is similar to how Morrison weaves the communal voice into her text. Sapphire also incorporates a communal voice, but she does so on a broader scale. Precious experiences different kinds of culture, sexualities, and knowledge that she does not get in her confined environment.

Even as Precious stabilizes herself, life has another potentially tragic setback for Precious. Sapphire understands that the emergence of Hip Hop culture is also the emergence of a rising epidemic of HIV/AIDS, especially in the African American community. Furthermore, she

recognizes that during this period, there is a lot of misinformation about the contraction of the disease and life expectancy. By incorporating this into Precious' narrative and making Precious HIV positive, Sapphire accomplishes a two-fold feat. First, she is bringing current elements of the street and culture into the narrative. This makes the narrative common for many readers, and it educates them. Second, she successfully makes Precious a fighter and a survivor, instead of another victim and statistic. The way Precious handles her diagnosis is both real and empowering. Understandably, she exhibits pain and anger as she grapples with the diagnosis. She even expresses her anger. Precious exclaims, "stupid bitch. I'm jus' staring at her. I wanna kill her. I remember what I know from AIDS Awareness Day at school. Look at Mama, say, 'You better get tested'" (Sapphire 86). Here, Precious shows her awareness of the virus and that she learned about it in school. This is important because Sapphire utilizes this situation to prove that Precious is capable of learning, with the proper support.³⁴

At the same time, Sapphire offers insight into how helpful this kind of knowledge is in schools. Precious' mother had no idea that she was at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS because of misinformation. Their conversation addresses the common misconception that only gay men could contract and pass along the virus. While Precious handles the news quite gracefully, Sapphire does something that Morrison does not; she allows Precious the space to be angry. And then her anger turns to worry for her children. "my god, Jezus—allah most high, ABDUL! Mama, Carl, me, Abdul Abdul Abdul, he my angel...Do Abdul got it?...AIDS? HIV? What's the difference? My son got it? Lil Mongo? How I gonna learn and be smart if I got the virus?" (Sapphire 88-89). This shows that Precious is a complex character. She is victimized, yet strong. She is underserved and oppressed, but still smart. She is angry, but also worried about the

³⁴ Precious' teachers gave up on her because she was pregnant again.

welfare of her children. She is capable of being all of these things, despite the treatment she has received from her parents and from society.

DuPlessis contends that, “what we study in the twentieth-century texts is the desire to produce several different figures at that place where text meets values” (19). Moreover, in these 20th century texts, particularly with street literature and Hip Hop literature, the characters are challenging societal norms that seek to complicate their lives. Precious’ character has been given a “death sentence” in the form of an HIV diagnosis. However, even that news does not deter Precious. She redefines her life, its purpose, and her self-worth. Though her news is dire, Precious is just now starting to live. This news is an inevitable ending for Precious, but her spirit is in direct opposition to that ending. Her spirit and newfound hunger for life are burgeoning with promise, but that promise and potential is yet again being stifled and repressed. HIV is another attempt to give Precious a literal death, but 20th century writers like Sapphire gift Precious a new chance to live. She exclaims, “I’m alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I’m winning. I’m drinking hot chocolate in the Village wif girls—all kind who love me. How that is so I don’t know. How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me” (Sapphire 131). Here, Precious takes a moment to realize how much her life has transformed. She recognizes that even though she has suffered a significant amount of stress and abuse from her parents, they do not define her. Their hatred does not deter other people from loving her. More importantly, even though she has been raped and has two children by her father, none of that means she is incapable and undeserving of love. Sapphire’s inclusion of a community of supportive women, all who share a commonality of abuse, is key to understanding the ways in which she uses the street and Hip Hop culture as community building. Moreover, the fight for literacy and education, in an environment that

would quickly relegate them to the streets, is more proof that there are some redeeming qualities about this gritty, street narrative. Through all of Precious' experiences, she found her voice and strength in the very environment that would swallow her whole.

Conclusion

Sapphire writes beyond the ending Morrison provides, by incorporating more of the literal street and figurative street into the narrative, allowing Precious to narrate her experiences, unfiltered through another voice or narrator, and by incorporating pertinent elements from the Hip Hop culture that are representative of the decade and the struggles of other people of color. *The Bluest Eye* and *PUSH* are two texts in the same conversation, yet the authors set out to tell these stories in different ways. Viewing Morrison's text as a predecessor to Sapphire's text is helpful in looking at how these stories are linked. Pecola's and Precious' abuse is a defining experience in both characters' lives. Morrison's narrative technique utilizes Pecola's silence as a rhetorical strategy. Pecola does not speak, but other characters serve as voyeurs to Pecola's tragedy. Pecola's silence, while limiting in some places, is useful in others. Silence adds to the tragic nature of her story. She does this because it shifts the focus from Pecola's rape and uses other characters to reveal the circumstances, layer by layer, which constitute Pecola's tragedy. Pecola's inability to speak or react occasions Claudia, the critical voice, to step in as narrator. Through Claudia, the reader gains a critical perspective of the environment in which this abuse occurs. Morrison provides the reader with enough allusions to the rape that the reader is able to bring his or her own creative explanations to the text. While this allows for reader engagement on the most basic level, it limits the reader from having a personal relationship with Pecola. Moreover, Morrison's use of silence can be read as a deliberate strategy to prevent anyone from getting closer to Pecola. For Morrison, it is unnecessary to have the entire town of Lorain, Ohio

discussing Pecola's abuse, and then follow up that story with Pecola's own iteration of said abuse. On the other hand, Sapphire's strategy is to skip the mediation.

Sapphire's *Precious* provides the reader with more insight into the person Precious actually is, instead of how her peers perceive her. Since Morrison largely disseminates information about Pecola through the other characters in the book, it is a limiting narrative iteration of Pecola's lived experience in that it does not have a firsthand account. The reader gets close to Pecola by way of characters; in the rare moments Pecola speaks, there is little depth to her responses. Furthermore, the reader never really knows how Pecola feels about the traumatic events she experiences. The information available to the audience is filtered through Claudia and the unidentified narrator. In rare occasions, the reader learns about Pecola, through her parents' short narrative excerpts, but even those are their interpretations of their daughter. Even Pauline and Cholly have no clear indication of how their action or inaction affects Pecola.

PUSH is an example of writing beyond the ending because Pecola's story reappears in a new form, with Precious Jones. By reading this character as an extension of a previous character, critical analyses that are acceptable for Morrison's work can also be utilized in reading, critiquing, and engaging Sapphire's work. Morrison's bluesy way of depicting the Breedloves' tragedies is the same way in which Sapphire creates her characters, against a Hip Hop backdrop. What can be derived from both of the novels is that the decade and culture out of which each author writes directly impacts the characters' development, voices, and outcomes. Sapphire incorporates Hip Hop culture as a way of providing a backdrop for Precious' experiences. If one were to examine Morrison's other characters, particularly Claudia, there arises a nuanced way to think about how Claudia's narrative technique might function as an extension. Except, Precious could only be an extension of Claudia's voice if Claudia were articulating a personal account of

abuse. Instead, Claudia is mediating Pecola's abuse. While Morrison does use Claudia to critique cultural, class, and racial differences, the reader misses out on a personal connection to Pecola. Claudia's mediation gives the reader a snapshot of Pecola's experience, but that snapshot is unfulfilling both for the reader and for Pecola's ending.

Finally, these two texts represent an opportunity to continue a literary tradition of expansion and inclusiveness in African American literature. Morrison's use of narrative technique does not make *The Bluest Eye* a narrative failure. What it shows is that there is an opportunity to give Pecola's narrative a rebirth through *PUSH*. Sapphire writes beyond Morrison's ending by allowing Precious to give readers a firsthand account of her experiences. Through her narrations, readers witness life on the street from the perspective of a young, African American girl who suffers an enormous amount of abuse. Whereas *The Bluest Eye* is a blues text about the sorrows of abuse, poverty, and the destruction of familial units, *PUSH* is a story of survival. Precious' story does not have the same murky ending that *The Bluest Eye* does because there is hope for Precious. Morrison's subject matter was taboo during the late 1960s. Incest, child rape, and other unspoken forms of abuse silently destroy the African American community. Morrison recognized the need for discussing these issues in literature. The same is the case for texts like Sapphire's *PUSH*. Her text, published in 1996, addresses the same issues, but she also incorporates awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, literacy struggles among people of color, and the effects of the crack epidemic. Instead of shying away from difficult subject matter, this is an opportunity to embrace texts that give readers pause; each decade or literary movement has its own set of challenges. Each generation will be faced with its own set of cultural, social, racial, and economic concerns. Literature, whether traditional or contemporary, mirrors those experiences that are endemic in minority spaces. Expanding these literary

conversations to include street literature ensures that diverse examples of African American girlhood and womanhood are part of critical conversations. It also makes plain the need for more contemporary voices in academic spaces. This is the only way to ensure that the literature continues to serve a purpose beyond that which is art for art's sake.

CHAPTER 4

“CREEPING INTO THE CONVERSATION”: SISTER SOULJAH’S *THE COLDEST WINTER EVER* (1999) AND THE EMERGENCE OF HIP HOP LITERATURE

“I wanted to write a great piece of literature. I wanted it to have wonderful characters, accurate language use, vivid but not overdone descriptions, intricate foreshadowing, powerful themes, multi-levelled plots, and an ending that created a craving for more. I wanted to write something so great that even if you hate me, you would still be willing to say ‘that was the best novel I ever read in my lifetime.’”—Sister Souljah on *The Coldest Winter Ever*

When Hip Hop artist and political activist Sister Souljah burst onto the literary scene with her gripping novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), it marked a shift in urban readership and in popular culture. Some critics refer to this period as the renaissance period for fiction, specifically street literature.³⁵ Souljah’s text is refreshing, gritty, and provides an inside view of drug and street culture. Before Souljah’s novel, often considered “street fiction” or “urban fiction,” there were very few texts that presented an inside gaze into the issues that plagued minorities, in urbanized epicenters, during the crack-cocaine epidemic. Souljah, an ardent activist concerning issues plaguing the African American community, including unfair drug sentencing for minorities and other social and political concerns in minority communities, incorporates these concerns in to a Hip Hop novel, as opposed to another genre.³⁶

The Coldest Winter Ever is an unfiltered narration, which chronicles the life of Winter Santiago, daughter of one of the most notorious drug lords in Brooklyn, NY, and the takedown

³⁵ Vanessa Morris, in *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature*, uses this term to pinpoint the emergence of street literature and its popularity. She uses Sister Souljah’s text as the beginning of this period.

³⁶ Here, I use Hip Hop novel to mean a novel written in and of the Hip Hop generation. The backdrop is Hip Hop culture.

that changes an African American family's life. Souljah's employ of Winter is so compelling because of the raw and brusque nature of her narrative. The language she uses throughout the novel is reminiscent the hardest, most dangerous inhabitants of the street. At fifteen years old, Winter's knowledge of the "hustle" is on par with the adults in the novel who have been hustling in the streets for years. Additionally, Winter's interactions with the characters in the novel afford the reader a unique perspective on the foundations of high-end crime operations, the twisted and often racist nature of the judicial system as it pertains to people of color, and the effects of poverty in densely populated urban spaces.

There are always consequences when the head of the household loses his/her job, but Souljah uses Winter and her family to explicate the nuances of large-scale drug busts, specifically those which affect African American men and their families. There are casualties and losses for all parties involved; some losses are more detrimental than others. Souljah's choice to use a young, African American girl to narrate these casualties is important because it gives voice to the voiceless women and children in these dynamics. In many cases, the narratives of women or the poor are rarely firsthand. However, the reader is privy to an eyewitness account of the destruction of an African American family unit, the devastation of poverty, classism in urban spaces, and one young girl's determination to hold things together. Narratives like Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* did not exist before 1999. Though there are other African American authors who have written about young African American girls coming of age in this particular setting, Souljah's was the first to introduce readers to a narrative that traces a young girl's coming of age against a Hip Hop, street culture backdrop.³⁷

³⁷ Souljah is a product of this community and works closely within the community to alleviate many of the problems and circumstances in which Winter and her family find themselves. Though Omar Tyree's *Flyy Girl* (1997) and Donald Goines' *Dopefiend* (1971) predate Souljah's text, they are men writing the voice of young, Black girls.

Souljah's work with Winter and her family does not stop with *The Coldest Winter Ever*. She continues to chronicle the experiences of the Santiago family with Winter's younger sister, Porsche, in *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* (2013). Porsche's story further complicates any notion readers may have had about the problems and shortcomings of Winter and the Santiago family. Souljah recognizes that each child in the Santiago family has a different perspective about their family's demise. Again, Souljah allows the young girls the platform from which to narrate their experiences. Though the narratives are vastly different, the reader encounters the same social, economic, and familial difficulties in each text. Conversely, what the reader gleans is the differences between how the girls view their bodies, their relationships with men, their mental and spiritual health, and their differing sense of community.

Souljah's use of these narratives shows that young African American girls, and other women of color, narrate their experiences in a way that can not be mediated. These narratives work well because they are so compelling; they address issues that are prevalent in all of society. Souljah draws upon real events, experiences, and places in order to create a fictitious environment that is eerily realistic. Though Winter and Porsche grow up in the same house, they have vastly different experiences that prove that 1) there is no monolithic, African American female experience; 2) the relationships girls have with their fathers and mothers shape their view of self; and 3) street culture and society heavily impact young girls, sometimes to their detriment when the family unit is seemingly under attack. Since Souljah's works address these issues in a Hip Hop context, and offer the narration from the inside of a drug empire's fall, it sets this novel apart from any others that have addressed similar issues. Because of this, Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* is heralded as the core text of a new genre of literature: Hip Hop literature.³⁸ While

³⁸ *A Deeper Love Inside* is an addition to a steadily and rapidly increasing genre of literature, specifically Hip Hop feminist literature.

this genre is on the rise in popularity and production, its works are still on the periphery, if that, of the African American literary tradition.

In recent years, however, Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* has received more attention from members of the academy. This attention can be attributed to a rapidly increasing commodification of Hip Hop culture, a move inside of academic spaces to seek out contemporary writers whose work mirrors the culture, and piqued interest from members of the Hip Hop generation. Souljah's text is showing up on syllabi around the United States and is currently in the early stages of film production. Despite all of the excitement and dialogue surrounding Souljah's text and her subsequent work, this movement from outside to inside the African American literary tradition has not been swift or all encompassing. Though Souljah has written several novels since *The Coldest Winter Ever*, only that text seems to receive any kind of literary, academic, and critical engagement.

Here, in Chapter 4, I offer first a survey of existing criticism and literature about street literature and Sister Souljah's contribution to the emerging genre of Hip Hop literature, followed by a close reading of Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Such a reading uncovers a rich narrative in which Souljah successfully lays a foundation for Hip Hop literature by 1) highlighting the persistence of community and family amongst African American women in urban spaces; 2) presenting a narrative of survival in the Hip Hop streets; and 3) centering African American girls and their struggles with body image and self-worth.

Street Literature and the Fight for Hip Hop Literature

Though Sister Souljah was not the first person to produce a street narrative-styled text—there were several male authors who did this in the mid to late '70s—Sister Souljah's texts provide something unique in that the central action in each text centers on a young, female

character. Authors like Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines write gritty street narratives, but they do not allow the women in their texts to speak and narrate their own life experiences.³⁹ As is typically the case in pimp literature, the women are objects from which to derive pleasure. They are bodies to be used up and discarded. Souljah takes this power over sexuality back; she gives her female protagonists agency over their bodies. That agency manifests itself differently, depending on the character. For Winter, her body is a bargaining chip for monetary and materialistic gain. For Porsche, her body is off limits to everyone; her body is her own, and for a while no one is allowed to get near it.

In an interview with Justin Gifford, street literature author Odie Hawkins discusses his perspective on modern, street “literature.” He surmises the current boom in urban writing is not “literature” by any traditional standards. He says, “I find it hard to call it *literature*. I don’t want to give a Harvard/Yale definition of literature. I might make an unpopular statement by saying that the so-called urban literature we are being saturated with nowadays is not what I call literature. It is not well-written work” (235). While Hawkins’ comments may seem a bit harsh, it is an honest critique by someone who is actively producing writing. More importantly, Hawkins is sure to point out that there are exceptions. He continues, “There are some exceptions. There are two black women . . . One is Sister Souljah. The other is Sapphire . . . I consider what they are writing literature because . . . what they are writing about will be considered of some substantial value in the years to come. A lot of the so-call urban literature . . . is not memorable” (235). Here, Hawkins’ main critique of labeling works literature is that the majority of them lack the craft that is evident in Sister Souljah’s and Sapphire’s writing. Though this critique is also

³⁹ Here, I refer to writers Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck, author of *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), and Donald Goines, author of *Dopefiend* (1971).

debatable, it does point to the respect and popularity that Souljah's work has both in the larger community of readers and among her peers.

Nick Chiles' piece in the New York Times, "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut" is one of the most infamous of these criticisms.⁴⁰ Additionally, in the article "It's Urban, It's Real, But Is This Literature?," Malcolm Venable, with Tayannah McQuiller, and Yvette Mingo, discuss the controversy surrounding urban and street literature's ascent to publishing houses and the resistance from traditional literary agents, publishers, and the general readership to classify it as true literature. In the article, African American bookstore owner James Fugate lambasts the classification saying, "I'm sick of talking about ghetto literature . . . it seems like I'm the only one against it" (25). Though Fugate goes on to admit that the sale of texts like Souljah's and others are extremely lucrative, he seemingly resents all of the attention the titles get, particularly when traditionally accepted African American literature by authors like Richard Wright and Nikki Giovanni do not sell as well.

While it is common for reviews of street literature to be negatively affected by the surge of street literature, one commonality in these articles and interviews is their appreciation for Souljah's writing style and authenticity as a product of the environment from which she derives her characters. Arguably, there is danger in trying to make all texts from street literature or Hip Hop literature fit a mold that Souljah carved out for herself; Souljah's use of certain language does not place her below or above other authors. This would force all authors of this genre to adhere to one standard; there is no single experience or perspective, so each author's style will be different. Similarly, Amy Pattee states, "these experiences of many of our nation's young people, offers them an opportunity to see worlds similar to their own and giving them encouragement to

⁴⁰ In his op-ed piece, "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut," Nick Chiles argues, "the rise of street literature represents nothing less than the 'sexualization and degradation of black fiction'" (Griffin 217).

escape their own difficult circumstances” (30). Many critics who were initially apprehensive acknowledge having a different perspective after reading the text. One such critic, Tamia Nadeem, writes, “credit goes to the author for bringing the ghetto so vividly to life. Once you get over your unease about this unfamiliar way of life . . . you realize that this book, in its own way, is a touching coming of age story about a misguided adolescent who has taken up money, beauty, and power as her identity” (Nadeem 86). Nadeem also comments on the book’s “unsophisticated language” as one of the reasons it is so appealing and relatable in urban spaces.

However, Morris argues,

Hip Hop as a culture clearly demonstrates the streets as a powerful symbolism for living life. If I were to imagine a mathematical representation of the streets as a motif in Hip Hop music, film, drama, and literature, it would be a very simple equation: street = life. In our context for literature, we can see how street lit is indeed really life lit. (19)

And, as Gifford writes, “it is clear that street literature is a growing cultural and economic enterprise. Driven by Internet fan sites, as well as the ever-expanding audience of black American prisoners, street literature represents an emerging popular genre of African American literature that cannot be ignored” (Gifford 217). As these authors and critics assert, street literature, urban literature, and Hip Hop literature have proven their cultural and economic significance. Since there is a clear demand for books published in these genres, there are many benefits to incorporating these texts in more academic spaces. The way to achieve this is to recover from the margins texts that “aren’t literature because they have no craft,” as Odie Hawkins claimed.

Hip Hop feminist Danyel Smith debunks arguments against calling these texts literature in her essay, “Black Talk and Hot Sex: Why Street Literature is Literature” (2006). Morris theorizes “street literature stories . . . seem to focus on relationships with characters experiencing

interpersonal conflicts . . . that they are seeking to navigate and overcome. Everyday citizens are characterized as having to reconcile unavoidable fates with street life and then struggling to either conquer or surrender to the will of the streets” (31). While Morris considers Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* and Tyree’s *Flyy Girl* “classics,” she uses the label “street lit” for works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1973), Ann Petry’s *The Street*, and Chester Himes’ *The Real Cool Killers* (1958). She considers them to be predecessors for other “street lit” by contemporary authors like KaShamba Williams and Relentless Aaron.⁴¹

While labeling these texts “street lit” can be divisive and gives a negative impression of the texts, Morris’ grouping techniques show that these contemporary authors have much in common with other canonical texts in African American literature. Moreover, these canonical texts are early examples of “street lit,” before the renaissance period of street literature. Reggie Scott Young, in his essay “Theoretical Influences and Experimental Resemblances: Ernest J. Gaines and Recent Critical Approaches to the Study of African American Fiction,” highlights the ways in which professional scholars shape canons. He argues,

One of the jobs of professional literary scholars is to shape canons . . . In participating in this process, scholars determine the works that are available for study by students, and they are influential in the process of establishing the value of selected writers and works. They are, in fact, instrumental in influencing how literary works from various cultural communities and social perspectives are to be read or not read at all. (13)

⁴¹ KaShamba Williams was the first to publish a teen-friendly street-lit book, turned series. This series is called the Platinum Teen series comprised of *Dymond in the Rough* (2005), *The Absolute Truth* (2005), *Runaway* (2006), and *Best Kept Secret* (2008). Relentless Aaron, author of *Push* (2003), typically writes stories set in New York City. His work was extremely successful; he sold mass quantities of his book without much commercial backing. For example, Relentless Aaron found great success selling his books on street corners in Harlem. According to Corey Kilgannon’s article, “Street Lit with Publishing Cred: From Prison to a Four-Book Deal,” Relentless Aaron sold 350 copies within a week. This response led more self-publishing and street sales that resulted in sales upwards of 200,000 copies of *Push* and a multi-book deal. This kind of self-publishing success opened the door for other street lit authors to self publish instead of waiting on support from large publishing houses.

Here, Young alludes to Henry Louis Gates' commentary about how canons are formed.⁴² Unless scholars are reading, analyzing, and engaging works like Souljah's, there will not be space for her works and others like it in the African American literary canon. Particularly in Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism, it is crucial that there are works in the mainstream and in academia that are reflective of the growing trends in urban spaces. Souljah's work is one of the few that has begun to drift toward the center of academic engagement. The growing awareness of and popularity of Hip Hop literature is an indicator that traditional canonical boundaries are being blurred.

Though Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* is one of the most popular in street literature, and she herself has been a key figure in community uplift and outreach since her youth, there is a little scholarship on the text. There are several reviews of *The Coldest Winter Ever* and interviews in which Souljah discusses her life, the text, and how the two are not so foreign from one another. These reviews are largely in response to the text's debut and initial reception in the publishing world and in mainstream literary circles. Several reviews and articles published after the novel's entre called it groundbreaking and compelling. Arin M. Lawrence, in the March-April 2005 *Black Issues Book Review*, comments, "*The Coldest Winter Ever* can easily be classified as consummate 'Mother' of the genre now known as 'urban lit'" (46). But, while many reviewers and critics appreciate Souljah's contribution to this new genre of literature, some of her critics are unrelenting with their criticism of Souljah's text and its literary value.

One such critic, Daniel Grassian, in *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip Hop Generation* (2009), engages work from eight African American writers of the Hip

⁴² See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and The Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told." He comments, "None of us are naïve enough to believe that 'the canonical' is self-evident, absolute or natural. Scholars make canons" (38).

Hop generation using their collective voices and varying critical points of departure as a way of commenting on race relations in America (cover review). Another review posits Grassian's as a filler of "gaps in the discourse with his thorough analysis of the works crafted by these 'Hip Hop writers'" thereby, making a "case for the validity and value of studying their sophisticated arrangements with race in contemporary America" (cover review). While Grassian does use eight Hip Hop generation writers, he does not devote much space to taking up Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*.⁴³ He does explain why he omits these authors from his idea of what the future of African American America's literature looks like. He claims, "This book's focus does not include Souljah, Turner, and other similar authors, not because their novels are without merit but because they do tend to lack the intellectual depth I perceive in the work of the writers explored in this book" (14). If this lambast of urban authors is not sufficient, Grassian continues to generalize and stereotype these texts, without much specificity. His primary issue with these texts lies within the content, or lack thereof, of these texts.⁴⁴

Certainly, these novels address hustlers, drugs, and crime, but Grassian is in conversation with critics McQuillar, Mingo, and Venable and their collective disregard for any literary merit these texts hold. Grassian lumps all of these authors into the same low art general category by saying, "Eventually the female protagonist typically overcomes her antagonist(s) (usually male) and becomes financially and/or romantically successful" (14). Grassian then backtracks in a footnote that Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* is slightly different from the rest of the coming of age in the street narratives because the main character ends up in jail.⁴⁵

⁴³ Grassian includes authors Trey Ellis, Jake Lamar, Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, Danzy Senna, Allison Joseph, Terrence Hayes, and Suzan-Lori Parks in his acceptable list of authors who are writing the future of Black America.

⁴⁴ Some examples of the texts Grassian includes are Ellis' *Platitudes* (1988), Lamar's *Bourgeois Blues* (1991), Whitehead's *Institutionist* (2000), and other prominent works from the authors included.

⁴⁵ Some of Omar Tyree's works are also exceptions Grassian's rule, and he briefly discusses Nikki Turner and some of her works, in comparison to Souljah's work.

What Grassian does is present a thematic discussion of texts that, from his perspective, represent the future of texts of the Hip Hop Generation. Grassian hopes “the reader will perceive the literary works presented . . . as unified, artistic, and socially important, deserving of both scholarly attention and a larger commercial audience” (18). Souljah’s text is set in the middle of a burgeoning Hip Hop scene. It can be engaged in the same critical fashion as the authors and texts Grassian does include. Grassian makes brief mention of Souljah’s work in a footnote, not to credit her for the renaissance in street literature, but to explain away her omission from a discussion she single-handedly revolutionizes. Grassian has a unique opportunity to highlight the literariness and authenticity of Souljah’s work, but he passes on the opportunity seemingly because of her content and language choices. Grassian’s use of Trey Ellis is helpful in understanding Grassian’s intent with this text, but it also points out the places in which he glosses over the importance of “street narratives” in this discussion.

Grassian interprets Ellis’ work in “The New Black Aesthetic” as a way of showing that African American writers are using the works of their predecessors as points of departure for the new work they wish to produce. Grassian comments, “This is a sentiment repeatedly seen in the work of Hip Hop-generation writers: despite commonly held beliefs, virtually all of them suggest that the contemporary state of African Americans is quite poor indeed. In order to wrest readers out of complacency, Ellis claims that he and other African American artists of his generation practice ‘Disturbatory Art’ “(23).⁴⁶ Souljah’s style of writing is the exact type of disturbatory art to which Ellis refers. The harsh depiction of life within urban settings and the myriad forms of violence those within it experience are meant to disturb and to inform. The violent and ruthless natures of Winter’s experiences are real; they are real for those women who grow up in these

⁴⁶ Ellis defines “disturbatory art” as art that shakes readers up (289).

communities. More to the point, Souljah recognizes that this narrative is truthful and relevant to young African American girls and mothers who are left to pick up the pieces of their families and their lives once their drug dealing men are jailed.

While Grassian and other reviewers are highly critical or expressly negative toward Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*, there are some scholars who recognize the literary and social importance of her text. Hip Hop feminists and other scholars of Hip Hop literature recognize that Sister Souljah's text is the first of its kind in that it spurns a new genre of literature. This new genre of literature is all of the things that Grassian mentions as reasons for omitting Souljah's text and others: unified, artistic, and socially important, deserving of both scholarly attention and a larger commercial audience. Gwendolyn Pough, in *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004), also provides useful insight into Sister Souljah and her intent for *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Of Souljah, Pough writes, "The dedication in *The Coldest Winter Ever* ponders the disappearance of love in the Black community. The phrase 'there is no such thing as love anymore' is repeated several times throughout the poem . . . For Sister Souljah, the absence of love in the Black community means the absence of loyalty, truth, honor, respect, humility, appreciation, family, and God" (161). Here, Pough highlights the problems within the African American community, but she also points to a larger concept of what happens to communities after massive upheaval. The women are taking over the households, once their men are jailed. Though the men are largely absent because of jail, a community of women still exists. However, there are problems within this community, but it does exist, albeit in a severely strained form.

Community and Family

Sister Souljah functions as both author and as the conscience of a volatile community in *The Coldest Winter Ever* where women are redesigning the traditional roles for women in the household. Of Souljah's text, Grassian comments, "In these novels, there is little or no real sense of community. Friends turn on one another easily, usually for money, which is the only collective desire those in the ghetto have (as portrayed by Turner and Souljah)" (15). I argue that in Winter's case, there is, in fact, an existing community. Winter chooses to disassociate herself from many of these communities because they are not financially or socially beneficial to her. This traditional sense of community that Grassian insists on using as a filter for what texts are the "future of Hip Hop America" is exclusionary and it overlooks the vital conversations in which Souljah wants to engage her readers.

Contrary to Grassian's assertion that there is little sense of community, I argue that there *is* a sense of community in Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*. That community appears in various forms throughout *The Coldest Winter Ever*, mostly as spaces that Winter rejects. It is Winter's inability or refusal to fit into many of these communities that gives her character a particularly interesting narrative. Sister Souljah, as a character, then, periodically appears with solutions to help strengthen these strained communities. Though Winter rebukes Sister Souljah's character, she serves as Winter's conscience throughout the narrative, in an effect to bolster the community. Souljah is that voice that Winter refuses to hear, but Souljah is the only voice that attempts to guide her out of her dire circumstances. Winter comments on hearing Souljah "the music was abruptly interrupted by the loud and aggravating voice of Sister Souljah on the radio. I leaned up and reached for the button to change the station . . . I sucked my teeth, rolled my eyes, and sat stiff while Souljah went on to talk about some black struggle going on, she must be

the only one in. Everybody I know is chilling, just tryna enjoy life” (Souljah 33). Winter continues,

She started talking about how young black drug dealers are the strong black men in the community, but need to change their line of business because it’s destroying the community. As far as I am concerned Souljah is just somebody who likes to hear herself talk. She obviously didn’t know the tie because the drug dealers don’t destroy nothing. If there weren’t people on line to buy the product, then there would be no business. No drug dealer I know ever forced anybody, not one person, to take drugs. People do it voluntarily. They do it by choice. The niggas I know who sell drugs be tryna help the stupid crackheads. (33)

This passage is quoted at length because it sets up both how Winter understands the culture of drug dealing in her neighborhood and the role that the men in the community play in that culture, including Santiago. Winter, though sheltered through much of her young life from experiencing poverty, has a wealth of knowledge and expertise about the street hustle. Drug trafficking and hustling in the hood is second nature for Winter; she presents the reader with more than a glance at the glamorous side of growing up the daughter of a drug lord, but her youth and naiveté are more noticeable when she expresses her annoyance with Sister Souljah.

Sister Souljah, though writing the words Winter speaks, is also a minor character who provides a critical and nuanced voice that comments on the state of young African American men and their roles in the African American community. This is clear when Winter remarks, “Just then the aggravating voice of Sister Souljah leaped out of the radio and started choking me . . . the Ancient African elders believed that what you sow, you reap. If you do something positive, something positive will come back to you. If you consciously do negative things, then negativity will rule your life” (Souljah 46). Winter hears this message on the radio while Midnight drives Winter and her sisters to Brooklyn, where her mother has been shot in the face. By participating in this dialogue in a textual level and from a writer’s perspective, Souljah changes the way in which writer and audience connect. Her decision to link the audience to the

street and use her voice as a way to bring the street into the text is a uniquely important one.

Souljah transforms street narratives into a literature that has a linear progression across the Hip Hop landscape.

Since a small part of Hip Hop culture addresses violence in minority areas where poverty runs rampant, Souljah provides the reader with several depictions of community violence that often occurs within these spaces. The increasing threat to Santiago's business and his family erupts in violence against members of the community and members of the Santiago family. For example, Lana, Winter's mother, is shot in the face, in the community in which the Santiagas rule.⁴⁷ This violent attack occurs within the same community that provides the means for which Lana can obtain a car. The streets, radio, the drug business, and Winter's family are all intertwined. This violent event harkens back to Santiago's warning to Winter after she sneaks off to Brooklyn. When Winter runs off to Brooklyn without permission, she claims that Brooklyn is the only place she knows.⁴⁸ Winter claims that Brooklyn is *her* home and that those streets are her streets. Santiago remarks, "Do you think those streets love you? They don't even know you. You could walk those streets one thousand nights and one thousand days and they wouldn't even know your name. The street don't love nobody" (Souljah 35). Winter is unable to receive Santiago's words because she is so attached to being the "bad bitch" of Brooklyn. When in Brooklyn, Winter is the envy of all girls and the prize for all the boys and men. This kind of attention and notoriety makes Winter feel safe and powerful. Winter's safe space is Brooklyn,

⁴⁷ Lana wants a red car for her birthday and though Santiago warns her that venturing into Brooklyn is unsafe, she demands that he provide a car, and that he take her to get one. Because he wants to deliver Lana the material things she wants, Lana is with Santiago when someone shoots her in the face.

⁴⁸ Santiago moves his family out of Brooklyn into the suburbs because of an increased threat to his business. In an attempt to keep his family safe, he also forbids visits to Brooklyn until the threat against him is resolved. At the time of their move, Santiago is not forthcoming about the threats to himself and his family; as a result, Winter and Lana frequently venture back to Brooklyn without Santiago's permission. Their disobedience contributes to Santiago's fall and the destruction of the Santiago family unit.

but Brooklyn is no longer a safe space for her or her family. Since Winter is attached to Brooklyn and the status it brings for her, she is unable to follow Santiago's orders, even though Brooklyn is dangerous for all of the Santiagos. Brooklyn, and the danger it poses for them, is representative of increasingly violent spaces within urban communities where poverty and drugs run rampant.

This already volatile community becomes increasingly more violent when Lana is shot in the face. Unable to speak because of her injury and facial disfigurement, Lana's non-verbal communication to her daughter is markedly different from any advice she would have given her before the shooting. She scribbles "Stay out of Brooklyn" on a piece of paper to Winter. A few days before, Brooklyn represented all of the things both Lana and Winter wanted. Brooklyn is the epicenter of their desires, power, and livelihood. Unfortunately, Brooklyn is also the most dangerous threat to them. Their old community in Brooklyn—the same community which Winter declares "her streets"—is no longer a safe environment for them. By stripping Lana and Winter of Brooklyn, they are simultaneously stripped of their small community of women and their identities that are inextricably linked to Brooklyn. Instead of being the quintessential "bad bitch," Lana is now damaged goods. She is so damaged in fact that Winter's position in the family shifts from princess to queen of the household. This shift is in direct relation to the shift in Santiago's operation. The community that once lauds the Santiagos is now an unsafe space for them.

In an effort to continue to improve the weaknesses of the community, Sister Souljah, as character, acts as the conscience of the community. When Winter gets in the car to sneak and meet her friends from Brooklyn, Sister Souljah's voice pops on the radio, "The number one group of people dying from AIDS is young black women" (Souljah 82). Here, Sister Souljah is

acting as the conscience Winter cannot seem to escape. Every time she enters the car, whether it is with Midnight or alone in the Benz, she hears Sister Souljah's voice. That irritating voice, though delivered in short bursts because Winter turns it off, seems to be the only voice from the community that wants to lend educational and potentially life-saving information to Winter. However, Winter is no position to receive that information and apply it. Souljah's decision to include these moments in this narrative strengthens the connection between character and community. She uses Winter's character to highlight some of the problems in the community, but also as an opportunity to offer hope to her character. Though Winter is not in a place or mindset to accept Souljah's advice, it does not stop Souljah's advisory cameos throughout. Winter is living in a very precarious time for African Americans, male and female, during a particularly hostile time in Brooklyn. The reader must also note that Souljah's messages of self-worth and community building play on the radio just as Winter is about to engage in reckless and promiscuous sexual activity. Though nothing immediately happens to her person, Winter is playing a dangerous game with her body. Sister Souljah's radio message does nothing to deter her activity.

The disintegration of the Santiago dynasty is swift and devastating to not only Winter and her family, but to a community of women. Winter states,

These motherfuckers came and picked Stevie up outta here this morning and I need Santiago to send somebody over to see what's happening and to bring some money so we can get him outta there . . . By sundown it was apparent it was a total wipeout. One by one, women's voices filled with fear, rage, and hysteria, called demanding that Santiago rescue their husbands, brothers, sons. They had all been bagged. (Souljah 92-93)

For the first time, the reader is able to gauge the magnitude of a large-scale drug bust. As Lana says earlier that day, she took a bullet for Santiago because he gave her everything. Her life was not worth living without him. That same blind dependence and unwavering support extends to a

broader scope of women. Souljah writes this to show that not only is Winter's father carted off to jail, but an entire community of African American men is going to jail.

Though there is a semblance of community, that community does have disruptions, which threaten to destroy it. Without a harsh confrontation with reality, Winter's younger sisters, Porsche, Mercedes, and Lexus will fall victim to the same complications and tragedies that Lana and Winter experience. The deconstruction of family and social order continues when Child Welfare Services splits up the Santiago children. Of course, Lana is incapable of keeping her children; she has no job, no income, or skills to provide a stable environment for them. The task is left to Winter of deciding how to manage the family's mounting legal issues. Meanwhile, their familial structure lies in shambles. Souljah highlights fractures within this community to further highlight the effect street life has on the Santiago family and on the other women in the community. The fall of the Santiago dynasty disrupts multiple families and creates a larger distrust that threatens the community. Specifically, Souljah gives the reader critical insight into Lana's psyche and her struggle to find a place in which to exist in her old community. She exclaims, "After all I did for her [Lana's sister]. Santiago gave that worthless husband of hers a job when nobody else would. She better recognize. She just better make room for me. Treat me like the queen I am and just help out till Santiago gets home" (113). Lana's sister can provide no substantial help to Lana or Winter. While living with her sister, Lana is forced to adapt to a new community. This community is not as supportive or welcoming to Lana and her children as they once were.

The problem is that Winter refuses to adapt to those communities. Instead, she rebels against the existing structures because they do not fall within the guidelines of the community Santiago creates for her and her family. Also, Winter does not want to be subject to any of the

rules and regulations that come with becoming a part of these communities. Sister Souljah's compound, in the text, is one example of a controlled, positive community, with a strong African American woman at its center. Souljah provides solace and comfort to young girls, counseling to youth, and a place of refuge from the harsh and unforgiving landscape. Winter's preoccupation with Midnight and his rejection of her prevent Winter from fully appreciating the help that Souljah provides.

Survival in the Hip Hop Streets

Winter's story chronicles the changes the community sees, as a result of a burgeoning drug culture and concentrated effort by law enforcement to eradicate the drug economy, in African American neighborhoods. Thereby, readers witness an erasure of African American men in the community and an increase in violence and women seeking to rebuild and recreate these communities. Though African American men have largely been erased from families and the community, Midnight, the only employee Santiago trusts, serves as a beacon for how to survive the Hip Hop streets. Santiago's business dealings and associates keep Winter and her family protected, but when that security is breached, Winter lacks coping skills. Sadly, Souljah indicates that Winter never has an opportunity to learn these skills because there is no one to teach her. While Lana teaches Winter to use her body as leverage to get ahead in life, Santiago teaches her survival skills with a "by any means necessary" approach. While this approach is unconventional for a lot of families, for Winter and the Santiago dynasty, it is their way of life. Though their family's structure has flaws, by traditional standards, it is still very successful and lucrative infrastructure. Once that infrastructure is dismantled, the Santiago women find themselves at the mercy of Midnight and the streets. Souljah uses Midnight and Winter as examples of how men and women must navigate the urban landscape. For Midnight, that means staying out of trouble

and leaving town. For Winter, however, Midnight teaches her a few life lessons about how to survive using one's brain, instead of one's body.

Midnight's explanation of how Santiago's empire crumbles is reflective of Winter's poor decision making. Winter's harshest critic, Midnight lambasts her decision making, saying "While your daddy was being raided by the feds you were having drinks butt naked with the enemy . . . his words pierced me like knives. I had been part of a setup" (Souljah 121). Even though Winter likes to think that she is in a state of constant control over things, her naïveté manifests itself in ways that only contribute to the downfall of her family. Santiago's prized possessions are not the thousands of illegal dollars he makes or the fancy cars and material possessions he bestows upon his family. Instead, his prized possessions are Lana, his wife, and Winter. Likewise, Winter and Lana depend upon Santiago so much that when he can no longer support the family, Winter and Lana have few tools at their disposal to navigate the streets. Winter must fight for survival, even when it means completely abandoning her family.

Souljah's incorporation of other characters shows how hard it is to survive in the Hip Hop streets. Winter is always taught to trust no one. However, Winter's trust in her friends prove to be factors in her family's downward spiral. Bullet and Natalie⁴⁹ facilitate the largest coup that Brooklyn has seen. The mighty Santiago dynasty crumbles, and Winter is left to reassemble the pieces. In this case, Winter's body and her use of it only momentarily contribute to her advantage. It is important to point out that Winter's sexual escapades or attempts to woo

⁴⁹ Bullet is a younger drug dealer who seeks to rise to the level of Santiago. He is a member of the young crew who are likely responsible for aiding police in dismantling the Santiago dynasty. Later, when Winter turns 18 and finds herself broke and homeless, Bullet makes Winter his girlfriend. He spoils her, until she lies about her whereabouts. Then he abuses her and ultimately forces her to traffic drugs for him. The novel ends with Winter getting caught with a large amount of drugs and money. She goes to jail, instead of turning him in, and is sentenced to 15 years. Natalie is Winter's best friend for the first half of the novel, until the Santiagos lose their money. Then Natalie slowly ascends to Winter's place in the street hierarchy. Winter and Natalie become enemies because each one envies the other. Natalie is likely responsible for Child Protective Services finding Winter while she is on the run.

Midnight take her away from home and towards danger but it is that very disobedient nature that prevents her from being captured by Child Welfare Services or worse. Souljah's intent here is not to make the reader sympathetic to Winter. There is no way to sympathize or empathize with her character because Winter has an inability to sympathize or empathize. Souljah also proves that as much as Winter is around people in the street, she learns very little about how unforgiving those streets are. Winter's case is unique in that she must think like Santiago, and act like Santiago, in order to survive. Her survival is dependent upon her ability to utilize her body and street knowledge in a way that will turn a quick profit. That profit is not for her to survive, but to get Santiago out of jail, so that he can resume his place as the head of the family.

Though Souljah does not allow the reader to know Midnight intimately in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, it is clear that Midnight is unlike the other men who grow up in New York's boroughs. Instead of relegating Midnight as another one of Winter's playthings, Souljah uses him as way of critiquing the Santiago family's decisions, the police presence in urban spaces, and the street mentality that leads more African American men to jail and the cemetery than any other place. Specifically, Midnight serves as a sharp rebuke to Winter's reckless behavior, including the consequences of her and other women's tendency to gossip and bring unnecessary attention to Santiago's operation. Though Midnight's tone is harsh and condescending, he makes a point to separate Winter's affection for him and her desire to join the street business. This is clear when Midnight lambasts Winter's partnership proposal. He says,

You can't be in this business yapping off at the mouth like a woman. Half the evidence they got on niggas is niggas telling on themselves over the phone and in their cars. The feds is listening . . . recording shit . . . niggas running around buying too much shit with no reasonable cover to explain where it came from, flashing, making a scene . . . Every man gotta do it his way. *I did it my way*. It worked out for me, that's it. (Souljah 141)

In essence, Midnight offers both a critique of the legal system and of Santiago's lack of business managerial skills, while criticizing the garrulous nature of women involved in the business.

While Midnight's comments are sexist and stereotypical, they are an accurate accounting of the culture in which the Santiago women and the women in Brooklyn engage. Meanwhile, Midnight pulls back the curtain on the dirty side of the business, while pointing out Winter's culpability in the raid that destroys her family. It is particularly interesting how Midnight lays the majority of the blame at Winter's and Lana's feet and their inability to function without emotion. It is as if their emotions are solely to blame for the downfall of Santiago's empire. Midnight claims, "Women . . . are emotional. That's why a man gotta be strong. Now emotional women have a way of pushing for what they want and not thinking about how things gonna end up . . . I like smart women. A smart man never chooses a dumb woman. All she can do is make demands, spend his money, and bring him down" (Souljah 142). Midnight's chastisement of Winter speaks both to his innate ability to navigate the hostile streets and his feelings of resentment toward the women who are attached to his peers. Souljah's use of Midnight's dialogue is key in understanding how two outsiders view the drug economy. Though Winter is a young girl, she harbors a wealth of knowledge about hustling; Midnight acquires his street wisdom from working closely with Santiago.

Souljah uses Midnight's character as a parallel figure to the other men described in the book. While he works for Santiago, Midnight is much wiser than his boss. This character is an example of the knowledge and wisdom that is present in a lot of young, African American men within these economically starving epicenters. Though Winter is the girl all of the men want but know they cannot have, Midnight's character is unimpressed with Winter and is above her pettiness, naiveté, and flashiness. Midnight criticizes Winter's flippant nature, ignorance of drug

laws, and her ignorance of the severity of Santiago's crimes. No other man at this point in the text criticizes Santiago's daughter, except Midnight. As street wise as Winter appears, she earns Midnight's criticism, which proves that she lacks knowledge about anything unrelated to money, fashion, and sexual relationships. Even when Midnight attempts to explain why the police take their property, Winter ignorantly retorts, "Since when does spending your husband's money become a crime? If it were, more than half of all women in the whole country would be locked down" (Souljah 106). Here, Souljah foreshadows what is to become Winter's fate. Winter has no knowledge of the justice system, drug laws, and the shifting atmosphere in Brooklyn. This ignorance will ultimately be the cause of her downfall.

For Souljah, Midnight teaching Winter about the severity of Santiago's crimes is also a lesson to the readers on the consequences for an entire family when drug trafficking is involved. Souljah understands that the rising incarceration of African American men in urban spaces is largely due to drug activity. Souljah also understands that when a man as ubiquitous as Santiago goes down, everyone is affected. Souljah uses Midnight as this voice. Not only does he understand Santiago's operation, but Midnight manages to avoid any criminal charges. This is unlikely in this environment.

The fall of Santiago's dynasty is also Souljah's way of offering up a critique of a historically lopsided prosecution of African American men in comparison to other races and to shine a light on the flaws within this system. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) compiled some alarming statistics from a study *The Sentencing Project* conducted, which estimates that since 1980,

The number of people incarcerated in America quadrupled—from roughly 500,000 to 2.3 million people . . . African Americans now constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated . . . One in six black men have been incarcerated since 2001 . . . 5 times as many whites (14 million) are using drugs as African

Americans (2.6 million), yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense. African Americans serve virtually as much time in prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months). (“Criminal Justice Fact Sheet”)

This study reveals clear inconsistencies with incarceration and sentencing practices for African Americans. This study also examines the contributing factors which exacerbate these numbers. Although issues like crime and drug possession are common among all races, the study assuredly contributes legislative actions like mandatory minimums, higher rates of school suspension for African American children, the “war on drugs” and “get tough on crime” policies as being especially to blame. These policies target urban areas like the spaces in Brooklyn, where Santiago’s empire affects the entire community. These spaces are already underserved, and most of its inhabitants live at or below the poverty line. When these African American men, like Santiago, are ripped away from their families, the income vanishes as well. While the men are partly responsible for their incarceration, the systemic issues of racism and poverty offer few alternatives to drug trafficking. In Santiago’s case, a large number of men worked for him as a way to provide for their families. When that empire is dismantled, and the men and boys are imprisoned, the entire community feels the impact, specifically women.

While Midnight’s concerns are more focused on escaping this toxic environment, Winter’s focus is on re-establishing her family and herself at the top of the socioeconomic class, within this community. Winter is completely naïve to the consequences of Santiago’s drug involvements. This is clear when Midnight exclaims

Can’t you read? Santiago been in the newspaper every day . . . That’s what I’m talking about—dumb women! You don’t even know what’s going on around you . . . But you know the name of every designer in Bloomingdale’s. Hell no, you can’t come with me. Your dumb ass ain’t bringing me down, not me. (Souljah 145).

With that proclamation, Midnight leaves Winter with Sister Souljah's contact information. Once again, Sister Souljah is a source of help that Midnight is offering to Winter; however, because Winter's mind is set on money first, and the lifestyle that she once knew in Brooklyn, she is unable to receive that information for the lifeline it is. It is during Winter's stay at the House of Success that her street savvy comes to the forefront; Santiago's business intelligence manifests itself in Winter. When pondering her business partner and friend Simone's usefulness, Winter thinks "I'd invest my money in the streets, triple it at least, and get my own place, loot, and life. I might as well have Simone for a partner 'cause she understood business and wasn't a gossip like Natalie" (Souljah 192). Winter's mind is always focused on the next hustle. Her persona makes her incapable of feeling empathy, love, or compassion from any one, unless it is financially beneficial to Winter. This mentality is one of Winter's strongest qualities. It makes her keenly aware of her financial disadvantage. The decision to mold Winter into her father is a premeditated one. She is as quick witted and intelligent as Santiago, and more beautiful than her mother. However, Winter's beauty is her most prized possession.

Self-Worth and Body Image

Winter's story is not the typical ghetto narrative that Grassian suggests. Instead, Souljah does some important work with African American girls and their ideas of self-worth and prescribed standards of beauty. While Pough is heavily critical of Souljah's memoir, *No Disrespect*, she is more accepting of Souljah's use of Winter's voice in *The Coldest Winter Ever*. She argues that unlike Tyree's Tracy, readers "know" Winter "in ways in which it is difficult to know Tracy" (Pough 144). Later she adds, "Sister Souljah's clear depiction of Winter's surroundings and her circumstances . . . Souljah offers a critique of materialism and the ghetto-fabulous mentality promoted in contemporary Hip Hop culture through a literary exploration of

the harsh implications that this materialistic mentality has on Black women such as Winter” (145). Pough’s assessment of Souljah’s treatment of Winter is both necessary and absent from a large percentage of academic discourse. Pough takes the time to read Winter through a feminist lens because of how Souljah positions Winter as the sole narrator of her experiences. Pough’s reading of Winter is a unique perspective in African American literature and in Hip Hop readings of contemporary literature. It is one of the main reasons that Souljah’s text can be categorized as Hip Hop literature.⁵⁰ Winter, to paraphrase Hip Hop feminist Joan Morgan, lives a life that “fucks with the grays.” Morgan in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, describes an existing gap between Black feminist critique and cultural norms. African American women are not one-dimensional statues with a singular experience; they are multi-faceted, emotional beings. Pough’s reading of Winter is much more nuanced than what Grassian offers. She writes,

Winter Santiago is not a very likeable character . . . However, what Winter and her friends who end up in jail represent is what makes *The Coldest Winter Ever* a text that brings wreck. Winter Santiago and her project friends represent the startlingly large and growing Black female prison population. They represent a wake-up call and a glimpse at what Hip Hop’s focus on materialism is doing to young Black Girls. They also represent what a lack of suitable choices can do to a life that, but for better circumstances, could have been lived out differently. (148-149)

Here, Pough’s observations point to the elements and circumstances that make Winter’s narrative a Hip Hop one. Winter’s narrative forces readers out of the shadows of gritty street talk and violence and makes the reader readjust his or her lens.⁵¹ Souljah’s text indicates that many young

⁵⁰ Though this chapter is about Sister Souljah and the emergence of Hip Hop literature, with *The Coldest Winter Ever*, there are moments, like here, where Hip Hop feminists offer readings of Souljah’s work with Winter. Chapter 5 continues this line of thought by expanding Souljah’s work to study her sequel, *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*, as a clear reading of Hip Hop feminist literature.

⁵¹ Like Pough and Morgan, I read Winter as a transformative character. Her ability to serve as the narrator of her story is beneficial to the reader because there is no mediation to her story. However, I do not label Winter a feminist character. I acknowledge that Souljah’s decision to center Winter’s voice is a strong move toward centering African

African American girls are part of a cycle. The choices Winter's parents make become the choices Winter makes. The cycle of fast money, expensive clothes, and drug culture perpetuate a dangerous image to which many young African American girls in urban spaces ascribe.

While Souljah's treatment of Winter highlights the issues with materialism and drug culture, Souljah also uses Winter as a vehicle to discuss teen promiscuity and a lack of mothering. Young girls become mothers before they are physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of raising children to thrive in society. For example, Winter's mother, Lana, gave birth to her at age fourteen. At fourteen, young girls are still learning, maturing, and growing into the women they are going to be. Lana matures into Ricky Santiago's woman. The things he taught her, she passed to Winter. Winter has a misconstrued sense of self-worth because she is trained at an early age that beauty and a physically attractive body are the ways through which a woman will attain status and money in life. Winter's parents raised her to value material things over all else, much to her detriment. Lana teaches Winter that beautiful women do not work; their beauty and upkeep is a job in itself. Winter comments: "Momma didn't work 'cause beauty, she said, was a full-time occupation that left no room for anything else . . . She made it clear to me that beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of. She would whisper in my ear, 'I'm just a bad bitch'" (Souljah 4). Winter's mother etches the "bad bitch" mantra in Winter's mind at a very young age. Souljah uses this as a way of showing readers why Winter grows up to be so materialistic and cold. Though Lana is teaching Winter how to survive in the streets, she forgets to teach Winter—or is incapable of teaching Winter—that a woman's worth is far beyond her beauty.

American girls' voices, but Winter is not a feminist. Morgan and Pough may argue that some aspects of Winter's story can be read as feminist, but I contend that Souljah's treatment of Porsche's story is more akin to hip hop feminism literary consideration.

Elder women usually teach young girls how to be great women. Winter's mother teaches her to be beautiful. Unfortunately, those lessons will only lead to Lana's and Winter's downfall. Winter states, "A bad bitch realizes that she has two options: (1) She can take him home and get her groove on just to enjoy the sex and don't get emotionally involved because he can't afford her; or (2) She can walk away and leave his broke ass standing right there. Having a relationship is out. Getting emotionally attached is out. Taking him seriously is out" (Souljah 4). Here, Winter narrates her understanding about what sex and sexuality is for women. "Bad bitches" are so busy being bad and beautiful that there is no focus on cultivating high ethical or moral standards. There is no concentration on education, unless that education is directly related to navigating the streets. While Lana seems preoccupied with being a bad bitch, one cannot just label her an unfit parent and discard her into a stereotypical pile of forgotten African American mothers. Winter is a young, African American girl who is learning to how to value herself and navigate the streets. Her parents tell her often how beautiful, smart, and special she is. However, both Lana and Santiago pass their worst habits to Winter; she assumes both Lana's and Santiago's personas. While Lana and Santiago teach Winter to be strong, they do not teach her humility, responsibility, or compassion. Neither Lana nor Santiago teach Winter about the repercussions of engaging in risky sexual behavior. Santiago would rather Winter ignore completely boys and sex until she meets a man in Santiago's image. Lana is content with providing Winter birth control pills and sending her out to the first warm body available. While all of this is problematic because of how early Winter is introduced to sex, it is important to recognize that women are sexual beings who desire pleasure; they have the power to decide when and from whom that pleasure comes.

Though Winter is underage, she is already developing an independence and ownership over her body. Winter takes full ownership of her maturing body and sexual awakening by saying,

The up-and-coming dealers on the block was Santiago's number two problem. I was his number one. He loved me like crazy but was getting nervous about the way men, young and old, was checking for me. It was amazing how in one year, from age twelve to thirteen, my titties sprouted. I even had the ass to match...I was walking around poking my stuff out in any direction that looked good to me. But anybody who stared my way for more than a few seconds was in danger of catching a critical beat down . . . Bubbles' crime was looking at me with lust in his eyes.⁵² (Souljah 7-8)

Winter articulates her maturation in a way that far exceeds the voice of a typical female adolescent. While Winter is aware that her developing curves are one of the many assets that Lana talked about, it is not lost on her how her father, Santiago, is resistant to her maturation. Like many fathers, Santiago's first instincts are to prevent any boys from getting close to Winter, but this is typical of men and their treatment of their daughters. The double standard of boys and girls dating and engaging in sexual activity is clear in this instance. One could argue that Santiago is so protective of Winter because he understands that he and Lana conceived Winter when Lana was fourteen. Santiago wants a better life for his family, particularly Winter. Lana only sees Santiago as overbearing. This is clear when Winter says, "Moms thought Santiago's ways was overboard. She told him she was just gonna get me some birth control pills and let me go, 'cause 'When a woman wants to get fucked, she gets fucked. She gets fucked whether it's in a car or a closet'" (Souljah 9). Again, Souljah shows the reader how Lana is both cognizant of the ways in which young girls come into their sexuality, and she wants to take precautionary measures to ensure that Winter does not become a teen mother, like Lana does.

⁵² Bubbles is beaten up and is likely killed. Souljah does not exaggerate, but Winter never sees him again.

While Souljah uses Lana's character to highlight alternate ways of mothering inside this street culture, her characterization of Lana reveals that the oversexualization of young girls can be a detriment to their development. Although Lana is very honest in her conversation about sex with Winter, she does not equip Winter with any tools for being a success that do not involve her body. This is the only way Lana knows because it was the way in which Lana grew into her womanhood. Santiago responds, "Winter is not a woman yet. None of these lowlifes are gonna make a trick outta my flesh and blood . . . Only a hardworking man, a sharp thinker who doesn't hesitate to do what he gotta do, to get you [Winter] what you need to have, deserves you" (Souljah 9). Here, Santiago does the work of attempting to explain to his daughter the importance of a man treating a woman with respect. His message is clear: no one in Brooklyn is good enough for his daughter. However, that message does not translate the same for Winter and her mother. Interestingly, Lana almost encourages her thirteen-year-old daughter to experience life and sex. This is one of the earliest instances in the text where Winter's sexual awakening is being shaped in the midst of opposing perspectives. In her brusque manner, Lana suggests that no one can control or stifle the burgeoning sexuality of a pre-pubescent girl. Souljah's understanding of the very early ages at which young girls become aware of their sexuality is vital. Though some would scoff at the seemingly carefree and nonchalant attitude Lana has about Winter's sexual maturity, Lana's readiness to send Winter off with some birth control pills is important. Lana's actions show that Lana has not taken time to discuss the complicated relationship dynamics of intimate relationships or the consequences of sex, aside from pregnancy. The decision to include a conversation between mother and father about their daughter's potential sexual future is more synonymous with contemporary views of sex and the agency women possess in determining their sexual practices. Granted, Lana is having a conversation with Winter about her sexual

desires; however, Souljah shows the reader that those conversations can greatly benefit girls if they are had earlier and more frequently, since teenagers are engaging in risky sexual behavior.

On the other hand, Santiago acts not as the tough, drug kingpin here; instead, he assumes his role as a strong father. Here, Souljah presents him as a father, the first man a daughter loves. In a society where the mainstream would have one believe that all women in the hood are single parents, Santiago is a stark contrast to that stereotype, if only for a short time. He makes it clear that Winter should strive for the best possible man who would treat her the same, or better, than Santiago himself. Unfortunately, Winter does not quite understand this at age thirteen. Santiago is such a renowned boss in Brooklyn that Winter thinks that it is impossible for any man to ever live up to the standard of her father. She says, “He often repeated that lesson. I would think to myself, Hmm, only Poppa fits that description. Now I loved Poppa but I hated the way he cock-blocked. Every teenage girl wants to cut loose and get close to the fire, but I was like a pot of boiling milk with the lid on. You know that’s ready to explode and slide down the side of the pan” (Souljah 9).

Winter’s interpretation of Santiago’s warning allows the reader insight to how she views men and sex. Though Santiago slit the throat of an adult male for lustily gazing at his daughter, Winter sees it as “cock-blocking.” It is not the case that Winter is seeking immediate sexual gratification, but she does seem to thrive on the attention at a very young age. This is clear when Winter describes her first sexual encounter. She says, “Take me and Natalie for instance, we did everything together. We even got out cherries busted together” (Souljah 16). The way in which Winter describes losing her virginity at age twelve is both aggressive and graphic. Her brusque description of the pain she experienced is almost light hearted and jovial. Nothing about her sexual encounters involves love, commitment, or respect. Santiago, though he knows Winter is

an attractive girl, warns her to find a man like him, but one who will spoil her and deserve her body. However, Winter's only concern is that no man can ever live up to Santiago.

Souljah critiques the prevalence of teenage promiscuity and a lack of parenting in *The Coldest Winter Ever* by creating groups of girls who engage in risky sexual behavior within urban communities. For example, instead of heeding her father's warning, Winter discovers her sexuality on her terms, in a community of other young girls. While detailing her sexual encounters, Winter paints a picture of camaraderie between her and Natalie. This is important because Winter's community of female support comes and goes throughout her narrative. Her support does not come from her mother, unless she is explaining how to take advantage of men for monetary or materialistic gain. Later, Winter includes more information about her group of friends. She says "Chante', who was older than us, taught us all of the sexual positions. She let us watch while she got down with boys when her mother was at work" (Souljah 17). Here, one of the most rampant themes is an absence of mothers at home; therefore, the girls have the freedom to be as sexually free and promiscuous as they want, without adult supervision. This trend— young girls learning the ways of the world and how to navigate the streets—is an important reminder of how increasingly hostile the streets are for young girls. Winter and her friends learn about sex from each other, in a community where mothers and positive role models are absent. Even though Lana is in the picture, she assumes a friend role instead of a mother role. While it great that Lana talks to Winter about sex, she does so without providing Winter with the emotional capabilities to deal with sexual activity in a healthy way. As a result, Winter repeats Lana's practice of using her body as a tool for monetary and materialistic gain.

While women sustain communities in the absence and presence of men, Souljah indicates that they mostly do so with their bodies, even if it means dying. Lana proclaims that she would

sacrifice her own life and safety for Santiago. This is a dangerous, yet too common occurrence for African American women. Her value lies within the valuation of a man. In conversation with Winter, Lana contends as much. She says, “I love Santiago more than I love my own life. The hell with other men. Santiago is the *only man*. He takes care of me. He does everything a man supposed to do. He has given me everything. If I had to catch a bullet for him, so what. I’d rather they shot me than him. There’d be no sense in living without him” (Souljah 77). This iteration that there is no life without Santiago is such a damaging and crippling moment. For Winter, who looks to her parents as role models, she witnesses all of the bad decision-making as an adolescent. Instead of her mother teaching her how to be successful and promoting education, Lana projects an example of total submission and undying loyalty to a man. While it is a great example, having parents who love each other, it is also a misleading and damaging ideal for an impressionable teenager. Winter models their behavior; she models her mother’s early sexual promiscuity, and she attempts to model her father’s street, savvy hustle.

Her mother’s life, her decisions and her shortcomings, and Santiago’s business practices mold Winter into the young woman she is becoming. Santiago’s decision-making, as a father, is also questionable at times. Santiago tells Winter, “Winter, you gotta be tough. It’s time. Remember everything I taught you. Keep your ears open. Follow the directions I gave you to the letter, and just play your hand close to your chest” (Souljah 102). Santiago is in prison, and so is Lana. Winter is keeping on a brave face, which is much more than she should have been doing at age 17. When Winter lies about her mother’s absence, Santiago says, “Tell your mother I want to see her one week from today on Thursday. Tell her I said pull herself together and get down here on Thursday in her best shit so I can show her off” (Souljah 103). Even in jail, Santiago is still using his wife as a trophy; she is a prize to be shown off as an indicator of status. Also, he is

depending on his daughter to step in and handle business for him, instead of ensuring that she never ends up in prison. Though Santiago never gets out of prison, Winter continues to make decisions that affect her ability to survive in the streets. The lesson her mother teaches her about how to look and act proves to be useless. Additionally, Santiago's advice on how to find a worthy man leads Winter on the same path to prison as her father. Winter's self-worth connects her to a man of the streets, much like her father. However, her street-savvy thinking fails her, and she ends up incarcerated. Though street-savvy thinking is a valuable tool in this Hip Hop community, Winter must learn that the community, in which her family is revered, is also the same community to blame for their misery. What Souljah suggests here is that, unfortunately for Winter and many women, they discover these lessons from the inside of prisons, much too late to make a difference.

Conclusion

Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a groundbreaking, genre creating piece of Hip Hop literature that chronicles a young, street savvy girl's navigation of the urban landscape by 1) highlighting the persistence of community and family amongst African American women in urban spaces; 2) presenting a narrative of survival in the Hip Hop streets; and 3) centering African American girls and their struggles with body image and self worth. There is little existing academic scholarship about Souljah's text, but its cultural relevance is paramount. Souljah utilizes the voice of a young, African American girl, Winter Santiago, to bring a uniquely, unfiltered narrative, which provides unrestricted insight into how young, African American girls experience a number of issues in Hip Hop culture.

Souljah's unapologetic use of elements pervasive in Hip Hop culture make the text relatable to readers who can relate to Winter. Those readers will find in this text that literary and

Hip Hop culture can co-exist; Souljah's text takes those issues that are most prevalent in Hip Hop culture and crafts them into a novel. By doing so, Souljah provides a blueprint for reading and engaging Hip Hop literature. This blueprint is just the invitation academe needs to recover this text, and others like it, from the periphery of academic discourse. Souljah has opened the door for more engagement and discussions of Hip Hop literature. *The Coldest Winter Ever* proves the ways in which it can add a diverse vantage point to African American, female lived experience. Sister Souljah is not just creeping into established literary conversations; her text is at the center of a newly emerging one: Hip Hop literature. This new discussion is constantly evolving and expanding. The next expansion is Hip Hop feminist literature.

CHAPTER 5

“A DEEPER LOVE INSIDE”: TOWARD A HIP HOP FEMINIST LITERATURE

“Never fall in love with the streets.”-Sister Souljah

The aforementioned quote is the last thing Sister Souljah said to me, after autographing copies of her novels, following a lecture about her latest release, *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* (2013). It has stayed with me as I continue to do the work of writing about the academic import of her collection of gritty, Hip Hop literature. After traveling to Atlanta, in the spring of 2013, I had the pleasure of meeting the author, activist, and one-time rapper, during a book tour. Souljah’s sequel to *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) is a continuation and expansion of the Hip Hop literature genre. Since 1999, Souljah has continued to redefine literature as she continues to bring these lived experiences from the unknown, misunderstood, and marginalized ghettos into the center of conversation, both socially and academically.

A Deeper Love Inside, then, is Souljah’s way of completing a story about the fall of a drug empire, from the perspective of Porsche, the middle Santiago child. *A Deeper Love Inside* fills in missing gaps of the effects of Rickey Santiago’s fall from power. More specifically, it serves as a commentary on how children, particularly young, African American girls, experience and cope with trauma. A lack of support is detrimental to young, African American girls, especially to those who are left at the mercy of the Hip Hop streets. When Souljah says “Never fall in love with the streets,” what she is really saying is: understand and learn from Winter’s and Porsche’s narratives. Winter falls in love with the street; Porsche is thrown to the streets. The streets are incapable of loving its inhabitants or providing any kind of lasting support for them.

While *A Deeper Love Inside* is a sequel, there are new lessons to learn. Porsche's story is decidedly different from Winter's narrative. With her father in prison and her mother on drugs, Porsche, the oft-forgotten middle child, is abandoned. When Child Protective Services separate the younger Santiago children, Porsche becomes a ward of the state and moves from foster home to foster home, never knowing her family's status. During this time, Porsche experiences violence and sees other foster children suffer violence with no one to intervene on their behalf. Porsche makes it clear that she trusts no one, not even the social workers. Though Porsche does not specify what violence she faces in foster care, it is clear that her violent tendencies are a defense mechanism to protect her from future harm. However, her defensiveness leads to her incarceration.⁵³ Souljah's treatment of Porsche's narrative is multilayered. First, she establishes Porsche as an individual, round character whose identity is separate from Winter. Second, as Porsche grows up with minimal contact with her family, Souljah showcases the differences in family and community for Porsche. Finally, Porsche develops a more diverse cultural experience beyond that of the drug culture of Brooklyn. This experience changes her outlook on life and the things she values.

In addition to these differences, *A Deeper Love Inside* is also groundbreaking in the way Souljah employs Hip Hop culture as a backdrop to Porsche's story. Similar to Winter's story, Porsche's narrative is unfiltered, through the eyes of the person living the events. Since Porsche is left to her own devices, she must fight to survive, both in a correctional facility and in the

⁵³ During a ride with a social worker, Porsche becomes enraged when the social worker speaks negatively about Winter and begins to talk about the Santiago family. Since Porsche views this as disrespectful and an attack on her family, Porsche stabs the social worker in the neck with a pencil. Porsche also distrusts this social workers' words and actions, since she and others experience abuse in foster care, and the social workers are responsible for delivering them to dangerous spaces.

streets. The specific way Souljah utilizes Porsche's seven-year-old voice sets her up to act in a way that is both mature and feminist.

Though neither Porsche nor Souljah lay claim to the term "feminist," there are some specific ways in which this text can be read as Hip Hop feminist literature, or the literature of Hip Hop Feminists. Gwendolyn Pough defines a Hip Hop feminist as "someone who is . . . immersed in Hip Hop culture and experiences Hip Hop as a way of life. Hip Hop as a culture in turn, influences his or her worldview or approach to life" (viii). *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* can be read as Hip Hop feminist literature because Souljah uses a Hip Hop feminist lens to examine key issues that affect young girls of color. This is clear because while centering African American, female lived experience Sister Souljah 1) situates Porsche in a juvenile detention center, which opens the door for a critique of the Prison Industrial Complex, prison violence perpetrated by and against African American girls, and African American women and girls as the largest and fastest growing population of incarcerated people of color; 2) highlights mental illness in the African American community as Porsche (and arguably other girls and women) struggles with mental disorders and other health issues; 3) positions women as community builders and mother figures; and 4) demonstrates how Porsche, through her love of dance, Hip Hop culture, and music, maintains bodily agency.

The Prison Critique

A Deeper Love Inside uses a Hip Hop feminist lens to critique the United States' correctional facilities and its affects on women and girls of color. This novel opens with Porsche Santiago explicating who she is and to what family she belongs. She immediately explains how, at seven, she finds herself in a juvenile detention center. Porsche, the middle daughter of drug lord Rickey Santiago, unknowingly follows in the footsteps of both her father and her older

sister, Winter. Though Porsche is only seven years old when her family's empire collapses, she is keenly aware that the police target men like her father, and though he is benevolent in the community, the police view him as a threat. What Sister Souljah does with Porsche's story, then, is to indicate how dismantling a large-scale drug operation affects families. Since drug culture is prevalent in Hip Hop music and culture, it is important to examine the larger implications of Santiago's fall. Bill Quigley, in "40 Reasons Why Our Jails Are Full of Black and Poor People," theorizes about the myriad reasons poor African Americans find themselves in the majority while in prisons. Of the many reasons Quigley lists, the ones most necessary for understanding this complex are police discrimination, racial profiling, the juvenile justice system, the War on Drugs, and the quality of available medical treatment. Of the issues Quigley lists, none specifically addresses the surge in women and girls who are affected.

Since Souljah is keenly aware of the ways society treats and neglects African Americans, specifically women, it is important to look closely at how Souljah uses Porsche to interrogate spaces of institutionalization. It is especially important that she does this through a Hip Hop feminist lens because incarcerated women and girls are often not included in these discussions. Black feminist critics Angela Y. Davis and Cassandra Shaylor analyze these issues in their essay, "Race, Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex: California and Beyond" (2001). In this article, they recognize that since 1995, there has been an increased awareness of violence against women in prisons to correct inequalities with women's rights, both publicly and privately. Although there have been great strides to ensure the rights of women, Davis and Shaylor maintain that "the violence linked to women's prisons remains obscured by the social invisibility of the prison. There, violence takes the form of medical neglect, sexual abuse, lack of reproductive control, loss of parental rights, denial of legal rights and remedies, the devastating

effects of isolation, and arbitrary discipline” (Davis and Shaylor 192). Davis and Shaylor critique a system, which already operates with women of color at the bottom of a hierarchy that compounds the inequalities that free women are lacking.⁵⁴ Since these practices affect a significant percentage of the Hip Hop generation, with an increase in drug culture within Hip Hop and pop culture, Souljah infuses her narrative of the street with critiques of systemic issues of race, class, and gender.

Souljah uses Porsche’s descriptions of her fights as a way of painting images of the prison landscape for the readers unfamiliar with that culture. With Porsche, Souljah thrusts her into the thick of prison culture; Souljah allows Porsche’s character to experience the harsh realities of that landscape, despite her age. For example, Porsche’s narrative begins with an allusion to prison violence, which leads to Porsche’s confinement to solitary. She says, “In a two-year stretch, I had seventeen fights. Nine of them were brawls *over hair*, with half-bald bitches with homemade weapons . . . in arts and crafts class, I grabbed the one pair of scissors shared by twenty girls and chained to the desktop, and cut off my hair . . . so she [Cha Cha] could stop fucking sweating me” (Souljah 16).⁵⁵ Even though Porsche tried to avoid fighting with Cha Cha and other girls, she is unable to escape prison violence or punishment from defending herself from violent attacks. This is evident when Porsche says, “They locked me up in isolation for fighting. Every time they act like they don’t know what the fight is all about.

⁵⁴ On race, gender, and the prison industrial complex, Davis and Shaylor argue that “. . . most likely to be found in U.S. prisons are black, Latina, Asian American women . . . An African American woman is eight times more likely to go to prison than a white woman . . . African American women make up the largest percentage of women in state prisons and federal detention centers (35 percent) . . . they are only approximately 13 percent of the general population” (Davis and Shaylor 196). This number is so high because of the war on drugs, strongly implemented and enforced during the Clinton Presidency. These alarming statistics point to an epidemic of incarcerated women and girls, particularly minorities. Souljah also acknowledges that there are large quantities of black women and girls of color facing incarceration as a result of these systemic issues. At this rate, there will be other young, black girls, in the same situation as Porsche. Souljah brings awareness to these statistics by showing how these practices affect not just black men, but also how the women in these communities also suffer, often in silence.

⁵⁵ Cha Cha is a female inmate with whom Porsche fights four times.

Every time they act like we fifty/fifty involved in the fight when they know damn well that chick hates herself and is gonna fight till somebody kills her and puts her out of misery” (Souljah 16). The violence of prison is not just about the institution itself; it is also about the population of women and girls and how they interact with one another. Souljah further critiques a system that largely discounts and discards minority youth and does so under the guise of protecting the larger society, namely white society, from drug culture and influence. If Porsche resists a confrontational situation, a gang of girls will jump her. If she fights to protect herself, she will still be victimized. For instance, though Porsche does not instigate a fight with the girls, she is still punished as though she were the instigator. Her punishment only compounds her victimization.

Souljah’s critique of how the girls and Porsche are punished is specifically a Hip Hop feminist concern because of how their bodies become a tool used to degrade, punish, and control the girls. For example, Porsche says, “Even with my wrists locked and my ankles chained, headed to isolation, I don’t react. They release me into that little space butt-naked. Then I dance” (Souljah 16-18). It is not enough that a young girl is locked up in juvenile detention. She must also face solitary confinement as punishment. To further compound the punishment, Porsche is placed in confinement in the nude. Here, Souljah gives a feminist reading of young girls and the violence they experience. That violation is something especially dehumanizing to women, and especially egregious, since Porsche is a young girl. This form of punishment is especially traumatic for Porsche’s female psyche because of the exaggeration of the humiliation by stripping her naked. Stripping away her freedom and her clothing is a display of power politics and shaming. Porsche and the other girls are constantly punished with forced nudity. Oftentimes their nakedness is on display and bodily shame is also a part of the punishment This shaming

tactic is inhumane and a reassertion of power. Even though Porsche finds herself alone, in the dark, in prison, and unaware of her family's status or location, she must also be a victim of unnecessary shaming and violence. However, even at her most depressing and loneliest point, Porsche finds relief and escape through dancing. Here, Souljah gives readers a glimpse of how nightmarish juvenile detention can be for young girls, and the way the system controls their anger, or reminds them of their disposition with forced nudity as punishment.

Souljah also uses Porsche's story as a way of intimating how easily African American youth can fall victim to the system. Since Winter's focus, in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, is solely Winter, Porsche's spiral is not fully realized until she provides that narration. Through these experiences Porsche experiences violence; that violence causes her to become especially defensive of attacks on her body and verbal attacks of her family. One of these violent episodes leads to her incarceration.⁵⁶ Though Porsche is very clear about why she stabs her social worker in the neck, she alludes to a much more dangerous atmosphere, being transported back and forth between unstable environments. Porsche continues to legitimize her outburst by saying,

She'd say and do anything, no matter how evil . . . as long as they paid her to do it. She'd drop me off anywhere . . . even if she knew for sure I was in serious danger. As long as that was the address printed on her paper . . . So they got me locked up in juvy. It's better than playing house. Everything is clear in here . . . No one pretending to love me . . . In here, there's only friends and enemies, no in-between. (Souljah 19-20)

Here, Porsche's candid nature provides insight into the instability she has experienced. Though Porsche is not specific about the danger she faces, what she does specify is that her

⁵⁶When a caseworker talks badly about Winter, while taking Porsche to another potentially dangerous foster home, Porsche reacts violently. Porsche explains, "That's why I jammed the sharpened number two pencil in my caseworker's neck as she was driving . . . my caseworker is paralyzed now. So she got a lot of time to sit still and think about all the lies she been telling little kids, about taking them to live in a better place, in better circumstances" (Souljah 19). This is a jarring description of how Porsche becomes incarcerated, but it also points to her larger systemic issues with Child Protective Services.

circumstances are endemic of a larger issue that continues to plague a system intended to care for disadvantaged youth. Souljah understands the potentially hazardous environments some children, trapped in the system, face. Porsche's age makes this description more heartbreaking. At the same time, the caseworker does not truly feel empathy for Porsche's story; instead, she is just doing her job. As Porsche articulates, sometimes doing the job means placing children in situations detrimental to their physical, emotional, and mental health. Those dangerous environments are similar to what Davis and Shaylor discuss in their essay. Women and young girls, like Porsche, have rights. Those rights are more likely to be violated while they are incarcerated. Unfortunately, little is done to prevent these occurrences.

Davis and Shaylor point out, "Especially for women of color, who are hardest hit by the withdrawing of social resources and their replacement with imprisonment, these draconian strategies—ever longer prison sentences for offenses that are often petty—tend to reproduce and, indeed exacerbate the very problems they purport to solve" (Davis and Shaylor 193). They argue that legislative politicking and federal withdrawal from already underserved programs further ensure that children and women like Porsche do not get the resources or help necessary. Souljah makes this clear with treatment of Porsche's character. Porsche develops a series of issues because of her detachment from her family, which leads to her confinement.⁵⁷ There is inadequate help for Porsche outside and inside the facility; Porsche harbors deep mistrust for those who attempt to help. That distrust is understandable because of how the authority figures treat the girls. Couple that distrust with the violence Porsche endures from other inmates.

⁵⁷ Porsche suffers from an unnamed eating disorder, schizophrenia, and potentially other personality disorders. Porsche uses schizophrenia to name her affliction, but since her narrative is from the perspective of an 8-year-old, it is difficult to discern if she is formally diagnosed with this condition, or if the doctors and therapists are speculating about her diagnosis. I use schizophrenia as a way of pinpointing one of the issues Porsche suffers, but only because it is the only term she gives through her narrative.

Souljah's treatment of Porsche's character calls attention both to the violence young girls face from those in power and the culpability of institutions like Child Protective Services, which help perpetuate this violence by placing youth in unsafe environments.

During Porsche's confinement, the prison culture begets violence in a way that is reminiscent of Davis' and Shaylor's accounts of the abuse of incarcerated women. Compounding the issues related to the high number of incarcerated minority women, women must also face a higher probability of violence against them, once incarcerated. Davis and Shaylor argue "Prisons are places within which violence occurs on a routine and constant basis. . . The threat of violence emanating from prison hierarchies is so ubiquitous that some women have pointed out the striking structural similarities between the experiences of imprisonment and battering relationships" (Davis and Shaylor 197). That violence then shapes how Porsche reacts to negative and positive stimuli. The guards witness the violence inflicted on Porsche, yet no one intervenes. When they do intervene, it is not to protect Porsche. This practice is inhumane and compounds Porsche's mental issue. As an allusion to the kind of sexual impropriety and bodily violence she faces, Porsche recounts her encounter with a male doctor. She remembers being on an examination table, and when the doctor was done, he touched her in a way that was different, yet seemed wrong. He "dragged his hand down my body and touched lightly the front of my panties, like light enough to pretend he didn't do it. I peed" (Souljah 45). What Porsche describes here, as a seven-year-old girl, is some kind of impropriety. She is a juvenile offender who a medical professional inappropriately touches. She reacts by urinating on the table and onto the floor. Souljah recognizes that this kind of impropriety is a common occurrence, and it is highly unlikely that Porsche is the first girl to experience this doctor's inappropriate touching. It is equally unlikely that she will be the last girl. This kind of violence leaves girls to suffer in

silence, with no solace. Being incarcerated only compounds that sense of loneliness. Porsche does not mention further encounters with this doctor, but at just seven years of age, it is likely that she is inappropriately touched on multiple occasions. More dangerous is that some girls may normalize this kind of behavior.

Not only are the girls being inappropriately fondled, but also the authority figures treat them like violent animals, whether they are fighting and breaking rules or not. For instance, Porsche describes the conditions of the holding cells and of the arts and crafts class. Though this is still a juvenile detention center, some of the commentary from those in authoritative roles is ripe with condescension, not because they are being punished, but because they are largely groups of young, minority girls. For example, Porsche and other girls are confined to chairs. “All seats were already cemented to the floors, but the hot seats were equipped with ankle cuffs so violent girls couldn’t move . . . she claimed [the warden] that if we kept wilding, she would put through the order to build classes with cages, one student to a cage, like we were wildlife, not humans” (Souljah 54-55). Porsche’s treatment as a violent offender, at ten, is on par with how adult inmates are punished.

Porsche and the other girls are suffering the effects of harsh prison circumstances that will ultimately affect their mental and physical health. Davis and Shaylor also examine the implications mass incarcerations have on the physical, mental, and emotional health of women and girls. For example, they lament prison violence as both aggravating existing mental illness, particularly among poor people, and likely causes of mental and physical health issues (Davis and Shaylor 198). This is particularly important for poor people because they already lack access to affordable healthcare. Once incarcerated, they lose even more access, and in some cases, prisoners have been refused treatment. As is the case with Porsche, “when mothers are arrested,

children are often placed in foster care . . . In many instances, this process tracks children into juvenile detention centers and from there into adult prisons” (Davis and Shaylor 203-204). This is exactly what happens to Porsche. What Souljah does, though, is make Porsche’s character the child in juvenile detention, while older sister Winter lands in adult lockup, for a much lengthier sentence. This is an important because the prison complex can begin at any age. Porsche, with the proper supervision and support, did not have to become a child of the system. Her incarceration, the system’s treatment of Porsche prior to incarceration are directly linked to her mental health.

Mental Illness Critique

Sister Souljah uses Porsche’s character to offer an important critique of the misdiagnosis and suppression of mental illness. This is an issue that concerns Hip Hop feminists because African American girls and women are often undiagnosed or self-treat symptoms with religion and spiritual comforts. Porsche’s incarceration at a young age largely affects her narrative; it is important that Souljah examines how the system is responsible for causing and exaggerating health related issues. Porsche’s mental health is of particular concern, since it affects both her life inside juvenile detention, and her life after incarceration. Since the incarceration of juveniles is on the rise, it is particularly interesting to examine the ways in which youth incarceration often leads to mental illness. A clinical research study was conducted to determine whether “youths with childhood-onset antisocial behavior have higher rates of psychiatric illness, neuropsychological and psychosocial dysfunction than youths who engage in antisocial behavior for the first time in adolescence” (Johnson et al. 1). This study is key to understanding the types of illness to which incarcerated youth are highly susceptible. Since Porsche begins her narrative with an explanation of how her family is well known, but that she is in juvenile detention at a

young age, with violent tendencies, one must look closely at the circumstances surrounding her incarceration, her age, and how the facility helps or hinders her recovery. The results indicated that the “childhood-onset group displayed deficits in verbal learning and memory, higher rates of psychosis, childhood maltreatment and more serious violent behavior” (Johnson et al. 1). These results further prove that youth who are juvenile offenders are more likely to suffer from a number of psychosocial and neuropsychological behaviors.

Though the study focuses on a mixed group, ages 12-21, nine of the participants are women. Since Porsche is eight years old at initial incarceration, she falls into the childhood-onset group. Her violence is always provoked, but she is still violent and identifies as such with a “red” prison jumper. These practices only contribute to her distrust of the system and further compound any psychological issues she faces. This study further indicates that the younger the incarceration occurs, the more likely the youth will exhibit long lasting psychosocial and neuropsychological behaviors like anti-social behavior and distrust for adults and authority figures. “According to Moffit’s taxonomical model, childhood-onset antisocial youth will be more vulnerable to risk factors . . . including neuropsychological dysfunction, mental-health problems, poor parenting, substance use disorders . . . and childhood maltreatment and trauma” (Johnson et al. 3). Porsche is an antisocial youth because she makes it clear that she does not trust anyone in the prison and she typically spends her time alone. Very early in the text Porsche describes her first interaction with doctors, after she was taken from her family. She says, “Have you ever been in the emergency room strapped to a bed, screaming out ‘Momma’ 156 times, ‘Poppa’ seventy-seven times, and ‘I want to go home’ thirty-three times?” (Souljah 9). Here, though it is quite clear that Porsche is a very young girl, scared and missing her mother and father, Porsche offers this recollection as one of the earliest forms of trauma she experiences.

When Porsche talks about doctors or someone mentions her family, she immediately becomes defensive. This is usually when her close friend Siri appears. Though the reader thinks she has a close friend in Siri, Siri is actually a voice/personality who comforts Porsche. Arguably, the Gutter Girls Crew never interacts with anyone other than Porsche, so it is logical to conclude that some or all of these girls are also voices/personalities.⁵⁸ Souljah does not pinpoint a specific trigger or cause of Porsche's mental instability. Her commentary early in the novel suggests that she experiences some level of trauma in foster care that causes her distrust of the system and leads to a violent attack on a social worker. Once incarcerated, Porsche describes several incidences in which she is left isolated, and naked, with only her thoughts to console her. This is where she first meets Siri. Porsche says, "Siri was the only warmth in a cold, cold place. She was soft and loving . . . She was quiet and exclusively mine. When I heard music in my mind, Siri would hum along with it" (Souljah 52). This closeness underscores Porsche's need to protect Siri from doctors and anyone else Porsche does not trust. Only when she speaks with Siri does Porsche feel love because Siri is the only family she has left, and Siri is the only person who understands Porsche.

Though it is not clear to the reader that Siri is a personality of Porsche's, Souljah leaves subtle clues that she only exists to Porsche. For example, Siri never speaks up where others can hear her, nor is she visible to anyone other than Porsche. Siri shrinks behind, or inside, Porsche when authoritative forces are in the room. One example of this occurs when Porsche a journalist interviews Porsche, with the warden, a psychiatrist, and lawyers in the room. Porsche remarks that she wanted to "protect Siri from them," as if their presence threatens Siri's very existence

⁵⁸ The Gutter Girls Crew is a group of girls Porsche assembles inside the facility. They are outcasts from the other cliques, so Porsche befriends these girls. Porsche teaches one girl, Gail, to dance as a way of encouraging her to exercise and lose weight. Their friendship results in a self-esteem boost for Gail. However, none of these girls interact with other characters or have conversations with anyone other than Porsche and Siri.

(Souljah 146). In reality, Siri must be kept a secret, in order to retain her connection with Porsche. If Porsche speaks out, she may be heavily medicated with drugs, which, in Porsche's mind, will leave her vulnerable to inappropriate touching. Or, Siri may vanish completely, as a result of the heavy medication. So, Porsche keeps her safe from them. Though Porsche is a child, she is experiencing a specific kind of trauma that often causes and exaggerates mental illness among African American men and women. Incarceration heightens this issue, which limits a patient's access to proper treatment. Whatever trauma Porsche experiences during her time in foster care, incarceration and isolation for violent outbursts only compounds her emotional issues. With no familial support, financial support, or medical support to lessen the stress of juvenile detention, Porsche is left to her own devices to cope. Siri is Porsche's coping mechanism.

The first time Souljah hints at Porsche's mental state, it is so subtle that it is easy to overlook. This moment occurs after a fellow inmate, Riot, approaches Porsche about joining her gang, the Diamond Needles. Porsche seemingly has a side conversation with her friend Siri about whether or not she should join. Since Siri is Porsche's only friend, she is not joining without her. Porsche recollects, "I pointed Siri out, seated beside me. Riot's eyes dashed one quick time like she didn't see Siri. Then she turned straight-faced and said 'No problem'" (Souljah 26). Riot takes Porsche in, though she clearly understands that either Porsche has a playful imagination and likes talking to an imaginary friend, or that Porsche is suffering from some kind of psychological disorder. What Souljah does here is clearly present places where Porsche is being child-like and "normal," but Souljah also leaves small hints that point to Porsche's deteriorating mental state. Riot does not address nonexistent Siri, instead she agrees and plays along with Porsche. Now, whether or not this is a courtesy on Riot's part or commentary on Souljah's part is

debatable. On the one hand, Riot is Porsche's real ally, aside from the Gutter Chicks, who Porsche assembles—though the reader cannot trust Porsche's perspective about which characters are real and which characters are only inside her head. On the other hand, Souljah understands that the warning signs of mental illness are sometimes ignored, particularly in the African American community. Though Riot is a white girl, and is in the minority in this prison, she still does not comment on Porsche's mental state. Perhaps it is a sign of incarceration; perhaps it is a nod to Porsche's age. Porsche starts to exhibit these signs very early in her narrative.

Another key moment in which the reader is forced to deal with Porsche's mental instability occurs after Riot and Porsche escape the prison and flee to NanaAnna's property on Seneca Land, a Native American reservation.⁵⁹ NanaAnna is spiritually in tune with the ancestors and as a way of lending her support to Porsche, she encourages her to be honest with herself. NanaAnna knows that Porsche is different; instead of calling her crazy, causing her to further isolate herself, NanaAnna provides kindness and understanding, none of which Porsche receives while in juvenile detention. NanaAnna offers Porsche and Riot advice to be inherently good while on this earth. "When they busted into my house and destroyed by family, there was already nothing I wouldn't do to get them back. Everyone said that was my wrong attitude, my anger-management problem, my schizophrenia paranoia illness and dysfunction. Everyone had already decided I was a bad girl" (Souljah 232). And later, when Porsche thinks she is alone with Siri, NanaAnna interrupts them and gives Porsche a journal and paper in which to write her journey. Then she tells Porsche,

The spirits say that you are carrying many injured broken bodies on your eleven years young back . . . you believe loyalty is to be just like the ones you are carrying. But your soul knows you are different. Otherwise they would be carrying and protecting you . . . if you refuse to open your heart and listen to your

⁵⁹ NanaAnna is an acquaintance of Riot's parents; she owns a substantial amount of land where she farms and harvests produce. She also has a prior history of illegally manufacturing and selling marijuana.

soul . . . you will fail and become the same as those who you are trying to save . . . everyone here on Mother Earth is afraid to tell you the truth. (Souljah 233-234)

This truth to which NanaAnna refers is Porsche's schizophrenia/personality disorder.

Riot goes along with the Siri personality because she does not want upset to Porsche or make her feel different. However, NanaAnna has a way of engaging Porsche in a conversation about spirits and body health that suggests she understands Porsche carries the hurt of her past around with her; she is unable to get adequate treatment or support in the facility, so she carries those broken bodies, which could be her family with whom Porsche is fighting to be reunited. These broken bodies could also be the different personalities Porsche carries around with her. Instead of keeping her strong, NanaAnna tries to get Porsche to understand that these broken bodies, of which she is fiercely protective, are the source of much of her distrust and they cause weakness instead of strength. Mentally that weakness creates Siri and others. Emotionally, Porsche develops a sense of distrust that prevents her from being receptive to help or love. In order to heal and accept love, she must admit to herself that these bodies are weighing her down and causing her emotional stress.

The effects of this stress manifest in Porsche's poor eating habits, insomnia, and black outs. She offers an explanation for some of her erratic behavior like locking herself inside closets. She explains, "I was in the closet because I was used to being closed in. So, I cleared it out, went inside, closed the door, and dreamed and danced and listened to the music in my mind in a dark empty space. Should I tell her that sometimes I had to exhaust myself to fall asleep? Or that I sometimes sleep only after I pass out?" (Souljah 270). Although Porsche and Riot have broken free from juvenile detention, Porsche still experiences mental imprisonment. In addition to the broken bodies Porsche carries, she also continues to show signs of institutionalization. Through her character treatment of Porsche, Souljah argues that the correctional system and its

practices are so engrained in Porsche, that once free, she still acts like she is imprisoned. Souljah's critique is a Hip Hop feminist one because of the implications incarceration has on young girls and women in and of the Hip Hop generation. While Porsche's problems could also affect young boys, Souljah makes her difficulties feminist ones by centering on young girls. Since women and young girls are not often centralized in critiques of institutionalization and incarceration, Souljah's attention to Porsche is particularly unique. By infusing these issues into Porsche's narrative, Souljah brings awareness to an increasingly alarming issue, which affects a large number of African American girls and women.

Porsche's time with NanaAnna is vital to understanding how Souljah is writing the literature of Hip Hop culture. Porsche, a ten-year-old now, suffers from several disorders for which she has received no treatment for two years. Souljah highlights this lack of treatment by showing how effortlessly NanaAnna engages Porsche about her illness, by not throwing around terms that she does not understand. She speaks to her in a way that a child can understand, with care and compassion, and without judgment. NanaAnna does not blame Porsche's parents or lack of parenting; instead, she offers support and patience and allows Porsche to be the person she wants to be. Though NanaAnna offers advice, it is given with love and wisdom. NanaAnna, in this way, assumes the role of othermother to Porsche.

Women as Community Mothers and Othermothers

Arlene E. Edwards, in "Community Mothering: The Relationship Between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women," explores the concept of women as community mothers. Edwards' understanding of what it means to be a community mother derives from West African practices of communities coming together and essentially using the village as a community point of parenting. Souljah's collective of characters redefines the parameters of the

African American community and the woman's role within these spaces. *A Deeper Love Inside* is a study in the destruction of traditional African American communities; it is also an analysis of how African American women, left to rebuild these communities, do so in non-traditional ways. Edwards alludes to non-traditional settings as a result of slavery. She says, "The experience of slavery saw the translation of othermothering to new settings, since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women in addition to the field of house duties" (Edwards 88). Though Souljah presents different kinds of community, among varying age groups, she also presents the readers with communities where women and girls are the foundation and the key to the communities' survival, which makes this specifically a Hip Hop feminist concern.

The ways in which Souljah's characters explore alternative types of mothering is also a specifically feminist treatment of the text. In these non-traditional communities, "othermothering" is the way through which these communities exist. For example, since Porsche is not accustomed to receiving affection, it is important that she first begins to develop a sense of family and community while still incarcerated. First Riot, then Lina show Porsche attention, then affection. Although neither is old enough to be mother, they manage to step into these roles as nurturing support for each other. As a result, Riot and Lina are othermothers. It is the kind of affection and empathy that any human would show to another human. However, since the Santiago familial structure promotes money and materialism as pre-cursor to love, Riot's display of affection is jarring. After a second encounter with Lina, Porsche reflects and says, "It was the second time, on our second day of meeting, that she wiped my tears for me, while I was red, my wrist controlled on a short chain, ankles cuffed to the chair. After she did that, I was feeling hate and love towards her, and I was confused" (Souljah 72). Porsche is experiencing an inability to process sincere human emotion, and that inability to trust people is what lands Porsche in a lot of

trouble. Othermother figures like Lina provide Porsche with the necessary comfort and protection she needs; they help create for her a sense of community and family.

Lina explains how jail works, by breaking down what family means to an incarcerated person. The Diamond Needles are a family; they are not a traditional, two-parent family, but they are a group of girls who look out for one another. Examining the Diamond Needles is especially important considering that Porsche is lacking both a real family outside of the jail, but also a family support while she is incarcerated. Here, Souljah provides an alternative family structure that Porsche will have to accept if she is to survive her time in juvenile detention. Lina reminds her that in order to “make it in here you gotta start off by choosing the right family. The family with the right connections” (Souljah 75). Here, Lina assumes a mothering role by choosing Porsche as the next member of the Diamond Needle family. Rather than continue to fight with Cha Cha, Porsche chooses to accept the invitation to join the Diamond Needles. Through this association, Porsche learns how to survive, and ultimately how to escape prison. Without this group, Porsche is lost. This is another aspect where Souljah redefines mothers and mother-like figures. Though Riot, Lina, and Porsche are juvenile delinquents, they all possess a commonality of family turmoil, in that they each lose their families, either by death or by imprisonment. By uniting these girls, in this environment, Souljah shows how women and girls build new communities, regardless of the circumstance. Arguably, these alternative communities of young girls are stronger familial units than the ones that exist outside of the facility, particularly for Porsche, who has often felt invisible in her family.

Like the Santiago family, the Diamond Needles are structured, well known, and powerful. Lina explains to Porsche, “We run this prison. The Diamond Needles are in all the right places. Everything runs through us or by us. Every Diamond Needle girl is in a power position. Since we

got the power, and we make the money, we get the respect” (Souljah 77). This group is in itself a powerful community. Though Porsche is antisocial and a violent loner, she agrees to join their community. The Diamond Needles offer protection that Porsche cannot get while incarcerated. Lina warns her that the “Diamond Needles clique is a double-edged position. The older girls will feel even more protective over you. They might try and spoil you . . . since you are the youngest, you have to show all of your big sisters the most respect, answer to all of the members, and you’ll follow the most amount of instructions” (Souljah 78). Here, Souljah establishes the Diamond Needles as community as a familial structure. Though it is not without its problems, the Diamond Needles provides the safety and security of community; in prison, safety and security are luxuries. Porsche comments “Getting ganged up was the best thing that happened to me since I was separated from my real family. Don’t get me wrong. Prison is prison . . . Unlike at my real home, which would always be the only real place for me, here I wasn’t the invisible middle child” (Souljah 84). Porsche articulates that for the first time in her life, she was in a space surrounded by people who saw her; she is finally a fully visible component of a family. Her ten big sisters look out for her, instead of ignoring her to focus on money and boys. Though making money and having access to items people need is a part of the Diamond Needles’ business, Porsche is a valued component of that system. This is contrary to her position within the Santiago family. There, she is only one child of several who are background fixtures, with no voice or purpose.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ There is a moment where Lana tells Porsche that Winter turned her back on her when she needed help. Porsche tries to make Lana see the ways in which she has attempted to save her, but Lana ignores Porsche. Porsche recalls, “She ignored me as though it wasn’t possible for her to believe one word if it was sprinkled with love or trust, or if [it] was coming from my tongue. Maybe Winter knew that even if she gave you everything she had, you still wouldn’t love her. Maybe Winter saw that after Poppa had a son with another lady, you were determined not to love none of us no more” (Souljah 291).

Sister Souljah is highly cognizant of the impact prisons have on destroying family units, but she also represents different ways in which systemic racism affects communities and how women adapt to continue mothering. Those alternate ways of mothering manifest through the other girls and women Porsche encounters. One example of violent intrusion on mothering occurs when Porsche meets Angel, Lil Man, who is likely a trans man. She remarks that Lil Man “wasn’t born because of love. Her mother was violently raped by a stranger. Lil Man was the result” (Souljah 128). Lil Man’s story is indicative of the diversity within the smaller communities, and how these differences do not matter much to Porsche. Even though the girls are in juvenile detention, they come together in the most unlikely ways to act as stand in mothers for each other.

Souljah’s representation of othermothering also extends to one of the authoritative figures in the prison. Ms. Aaronson is the arts and crafts teacher who often laments the girls’ behavior toward each other. For example, Porsche crafts a handmade dress that Ms. Aaronson compliments, as she laments their talents being wasted since they are incarcerated and seemingly have no future. Though Ms. Aaronson acknowledges the girls have talent, she is also quite critical of the girls and their various circumstances. She is not their mother, but she serves an othermother role with her supervision and critique of them. Also important here is that during Ms. Aaronson’s moment of praise and critique, Porsche finally sees some expression of community from the girls, which causes an emotional reaction from her. The girls clap, and then something more than applause happens. Porsche recalls, “Niecey grabbed my little fingers and held my hand . . . Hers was the first human touch I had felt since Momma and Winter. Not the same as someone slapping my face and me punching her lights out . . . But someone touching me like they cared for me, someone other than Siri” (Souljah 134-135). Here, Souljah creates a

poignant moment of community not between inmates, but a community of girls who have something in common. Ms. Aaronson does little to nurture their talents. Instead, her role is authoritative, rule enforcer. But a single touch brings Porsche close to her former family, or at the very least she is able to feel that fleeting familial affection, through Niecey. While the girls successfully create small, diverse communities inside the prison, Souljah also presents examples of diverse communities outside of the prison.

Another example of women as community mothers occurs on the Seneca land with NanaAnna. This Indian Reservation is the first place where Porsche learns about native culture, finds a job, and learns how to work for the things she wants. NanaAnna takes in both Riot and Porsche, gives them jobs on her land and food. More than that, NanaAnna provides a safe space for Porsche to acclimate herself to civilian living, though they are escaped juveniles. NanaAnna is security; the police cannot come looking for Porsche on the Seneca land, and some of her fears are alleviated, briefly. However, Porsche's longing for her real family and community never disappears. She laments, "I felt like a stranger in a nice foreign family. I missed my real family. I needed Poppa. There was no father here. I felt good that I had prepared pasta . . . it would have been better if I had cooked this same meal for my real family..." (Souljah 267). Porsche is at the healthiest point in her life; women who are invested in her spiritual and mental health surround her. Still, Porsche longs to get back to her old life, unaware that it no longer exists.

Porsche, who has been nurtured in a community of othermothers, assumes the othermother role, when she returns to Brooklyn, in search of her mother. When Porsche journeys back to Brooklyn, she is still entering a community in which the men are absent, due to prison incarceration and the war on drugs. In this close-knit community, the take down of one drug lord disrupts the entire community. Though Porsche wants nothing more than to be reunited with her

family, that reunion is impossible. Lana Santiago's struggles with drugs prevent her from providing the care and support Porsche desperately needs. Porsche attempts to create that perfect community, the fairytale community that keeps her fighting to get back to her old life, while in juvenile detention and on the reservation. Unfortunately, this community is still overrun with drugs and street violence, and discriminatory policing. Instead of being supported, Porsche must now assume the adult role. In one particularly heartbreaking moment, Porsche describes a shower she took with Lana, after one of Lana's drug binge disappearances. Porsche tracks her down and finds her dirty and hungry. She says, "I turned on some music to make Momma feel better. Oddly, in a frightening way, the first cut that came on was 'Dear Mamma,' by Tupac Shakur. It was September 13, 1996, the exact day the bullets finally killed him . . . Tupac believed that a crack fiend could still be a black queen. I looked at Momma, hoping his words could possibly be true" (Souljah 249). In this moment, Souljah links mothering/othermothering with Hip Hop music. What Porsche interrogates here is the irony of Tupac's murder and this song, an ode to his mother, playing while Porsche bathed the street off her mother. Porsche questions whether or not Tupac's lyrics apply to Lana. It is not that Porsche is in disbelief that her mother is a queen. She has always been a queen for Porsche and her siblings. However, the streets, the harsh reality of a broken community, and the consequences of the crack-cocaine epidemic nearly erase all remnants of Lana Santiago, queen of Brooklyn. Now, she is a crack fiend; however, Tupac holds his mother in high regard, praising her for making the best out of a bad situation. Porsche wonders if she should have the same dedication to Lana, as Tupac has for his mother. While listening to Tupac's lyrics about drugs and death, Porsche wonders if death can be a relief or if there is more suffering after death. However, Souljah does not make it

explicitly clear if that relief is for Lana or for Porsche. What the reader does know is that relief or lack of relief severely affects their ability to form a viable community.

Porsche's and Lana's small community is the only place in the text where the communal structure fails. This failure is partially due to Porsche's and Lana's homelessness. Lana's drug abuse also complicates the family structure and community Porsche works to create.

Additionally, Porsche's and Lana's community is lacking in support unlike the other communities Porsche encounters. Here, Souljah reminds the readers that Porsche's family is incapable of providing the community and nurturing she needs. Instead of Lana providing for Porsche, Porsche and Siri act as mothers to Lana. Though Porsche is much more mature than when the police take her from her family, Lana's regression to the streets and drugs is much too toxic for Porsche to mature into the young woman she wants to be. In Brooklyn, with Lana, Porsche is still invisible.

Here, Souljah shows that women can create and sustain communities, in the absence of male figures, and that these non-traditional families and communities occur among the young girls in prison and in other places throughout Porsche's narrative. The reality of these communities is that when prisons and cemeteries strip these communities of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, the women can and will step in to rebuild these communities. However, sometimes the price of these newly formed communities is too high. Porsche's mental instability is a direct result of being stripped from her family and isolated, too early in her life, with little to no resources to help her cope. Fortunately, the communities she does enter provide her with street savvy and survival skills to survive the unforgiving Hip Hop streets.

Agency Through Dance, Hip Hop Culture

Souljah's presents a Hip Hop feminist lens through Porsche's use of dance to locate and maintain power, or agency through dance, via Hip Hop music. Porsche experiences much violence through her incarceration, which in turns leads to mental and physical health issues. Through all of her unfortunate circumstances, Porsche is able to locate a sense of power, agency, through dance. Early in the text, Porsche describes how dancing makes her feel and how dance is linked to Hip Hop culture. She comments, "I'm a dancer, not a stuck up ballerina . . . Back on our Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, block I had an all-girls dance crew . . . People were amazed at how our young bodies could bend and move . . . We tore it up, moving to a Rob Base throwback titled 'It Takes Two'" (Souljah 16-17). Here, she demonstrates a connection to the community, Hip Hop music, and dance. Dancing is the thing Porsche does best. It has always been the thing over which Porsche exudes the most control. The incorporation of Hip Hop music and culture occurs early in her narrative and is infused throughout.

Souljah uses her expertise as a Hip Hop artist and writer to establish a musical backdrop to Porsche's dancing. Porsche maintains body agency through dance because it is through dance that Porsche has power and control. Incarceration strips Porsche of almost all of her power, but it cannot strip her of her dancing. For Porsche, dancing is agency. Various kinds of music and culture, namely Hip Hop provide a vehicle through which Porsche maintains agency. One of the first descriptions the reader gets about music comes as Porsche grapples with being incarcerated. Porsche very clearly explains that her time in juvenile detention comes after a tumultuous back and forth with Child Protective Services. Though she does not specify what kind of dangers she experienced, the reader can surmise that the danger Porsche faces is jarring and it happens to other children. It can also be argued that Porsche has no control over her body, and who violates

it, so she has to find a defense mechanism. She finds that in dance, music, and Siri. Since it has already been established that incarceration likely causes and heightens Porsche's mental condition, it is important that Souljah stresses the coping mechanisms available to Porsche, or the lack thereof. Siri provides the necessary comfort that Porsche needs. Through Siri, Porsche also finds an escape through the music only they can hear. She says,

Hearing her hum was real soothing and different. I mean, I was in love with music of all kinds; especially songs that made me catch feelings or remember memories. I was used to hearing the beat bod, rhymes, and all types of voices and instruments. Her voice massaged me, even when it was beneath a break-beat. She was the soundtrack to the film that I didn't want to be starring in, but was. No matter who else I met, fought, or maneuvered around with me and Siri had been inseparable since we met in cold, dark dorm. (Souljah 52-53)

This description is key in understanding how Porsche copes with her incarceration. When Siri appears she does so when Porsche hears or replays music in her head. Porsche and Siri hum over beats from all genres of music, yet Porsche is specific in how she refers to the Hip Hop music and culture that she is accustomed to hearing. These musical interludes are soothing because Porsche is able to escape her current environment, through the music. It is not a new concept that music can be transformative, but Sister Souljah consciously crafts these references into Porsche's narrative because of the influence Hip Hop music has on this period.

Though Porsche's mom fails her in many ways, she does instill in her the value of dance in her life. Though her advice is usually a misguided attribution of wealth to body value, Porsche does value her body and her ability to utilize her talent for dance. That talent is the one thing that separates Porsche from the other girls. Though she is young, she is very skilled at dance. When Riot suggests that Porsche dance at an annual festival for prizes, Porsche retorts, "I'm the producer and choreographer for the seven girls that are gonna grab first place. I'm gonna teach them the dopest moves. When they win, they're gonna pay me my fee" (Souljah 87). This is key

because Momma tells Porsche “One day someone will pay you a million bucks to move your hips like that” (Souljah 87). Though incarceration strips the girls of almost everything, even their dignity, Porsche controls her body through dance, both how and when she performs. That is the most admirable characteristic about her. Since Souljah gives her that clear sense of body ownership, even though she would likely win the prize, Porsche is unwilling to sacrifice her body in that way because she is keenly aware and has been taught that her body and her movements are worth more. Dancing is the one place Porsche demonstrates agency, particularly while incarcerated.

Souljah weaves a Hip Hop narrative into Porsche’s story with specific references to Hip Hop music. On her first night, Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video plays in Porsche’s head. This becomes one of the ways in which Porsche copes with the loneliness in the dark. The music she hears in her head helps her to maintain some control, albeit fleeting, over her mind. It keeps her living and dancing in a space where there will never be music. All she has is the music she remembers and replays in her head (Souljah 30). Porsche discusses music with her Gutter Girls as one of the girls proudly exclaims that Tupac Shakur is her favorite rapper and Bone Thugs & Harmony is her favorite rap group (Souljah 26). It is clear that Souljah wants the reader to understand clearly Porsche’s relationship with dance and Hip Hop music. Considering the period and the popularity of Tupac and Bone Thugs & Harmony, Souljah references these artists as a way of incorporating prominent Hip Hop music into the backdrop. During this period, Souljah adds these elements to show that Hip Hop music and culture are a vital part of Porsche’s life in prison. Music, mostly playing in Porsche’s mind, calms Porsche. It gives her a reason to dance, even alone in the dark. Even other girls in the jail represent their different cultural music. Rose Marie asks Winter, “Whatcha know about music? Jamaica has the best music, ya know.

Everybody copy Jamaica, our style . . . We got the wicked sound boys, wicked sound systems . . . her accent getting thicker as she got more excited about her home country” (Souljah 115). Here, Souljah introduces small references to the Caribbean, West Indian cultural influences. These cultures and sounds permeate much of Hip Hop culture, specifically in urbanized spaces in New York City.

One of the ways Souljah incorporates female Hip Hop artists occurs on the day Porsche and Riot break out of the facility. During the annual festival, Porsche recalls the sounds of Nas and Lauryn Hill singing “If I Ruled the World.” She remarks, “It was the melodic voice of Lauryn Hill. She was that pretty, dark fudge brown Fugee girl . . . Nas . . . was weaving his words together so perfectly, spitting so nice, my body started moving. Brooklyn’s Notorious B.I.G. was the best, but on the low a Queens dude had put all our hoods on the map painting authentic scenarios with words and rhymed more better than Shakespeare” (Souljah 105). Here, Porsche is hearing for the first time a song that takes her back to Brooklyn, but also makes her feel the rhythm and beat in her body. It causes her to dance and for a moment, she is in sync with the music, and the facility is non-existent. But, she is also paying attention to the way Nas’ skilled lyricism and rhyme scheme is more impressive than Shakespeare. That literary connection is both indicative of the value Souljah places on Hip Hop and its ability to link artistry with intellect and how much of a product of the environment and community all of these artists are. Porsche is from Brooklyn and has a great affinity for The Notorious B.I.G., yet she recognizes the cultural impact that Nas, a Queen’s native, has for multiple communities. In this moment, Hip Hop offers Porsche a chance to transport herself back to her community. In this moment, she is free.

Souljah also introduces the reader to different kinds of music, outside of the Hip Hop music with which Porsche is most familiar. The neighboring Seneca natives discuss their musical tastes, “Our parents and the elders force us to practice a traditional dance at the Native School, for our Autumn Festival, but we don’t want to. It’s not like cool music. It’s like drumming and we are supposed to do this spiritual thing” (Souljah 281). This is the second instance where Souljah specifically incorporates Native American cultural dance and music. Though the kids dislike it because it is not cool, namely not Hip Hop music, the beating of the drums entralls Porsche. Though in the beginning, it is the way Porsche copes with the traumas in her life, later it is this kind of spiritual expressive dance through which Porsche is finally able to free herself of those broken bodies. Porsche finds an outlet for her emotions that does not leave her unconscious in a dark closet. Even on the reservation, Porsche is always near music, and it keeps her calm. One night, drumming wakes her from her sleep. She recalls, “the driving rhythm was calling me. My body heard it first, my heart and insides, and then my feet next . . . the beat had me going, heart racing . . . Below the fire sticks sat a Native drumming. His hands were moving like music . . . it wasn’t Hip Hop. Still it had deep feeling” (Souljah 259). That feeling is transformative for Porsche. Now, she dances because the music and the beats drive her to do so. It is such a therapeutic and freeing moment that Porsche strips naked. She says, “With my clothes peeled off now, I felt the warm night breeze. Without clothes, nothing was weighing me down. My body began to heat up. It was dancing, moving only on feelings” (Souljah 259). Here, Porsche is finally feeling and expressing emotion; the music captivates her and allows her to grow and transform with the beat of the songs. This shedding of clothes is also symbolic of the weight and broken bodies Porsche carries with her.

Souljah links Porsche's agency to dance and Hip Hop in a way that is representative of Hip Hop feminism. She links Porsche's power directly to the existing music culture of Hip Hop and her body and how she uses it. Hip Hop music allows Porsche to be free of that weight, if only for a short time. Later, when Porsche moves to Brooklyn, she experiences that same kind of expressive freedom when she hears Hip Hop music playing at a Halloween carnival. She says, "When I am dancing, I am also doing body art . . . I'm showcasing the body through movement. When I am dancing, if I am not alone like I usually am, I am showing whoever's watching something so heartfelt and captivating that it would remain in their mind for as long as a memory could exist" (Souljah 274). This time, Porsche is dancing in the public, without fear that she will be identified and arrested. As a free girl, she lets the music take over her and allows her body to make art out of the beats. Here, Souljah clearly shows the reader how the music and culture transform Porsche. Since Siri is never around for these dances, one could argue that Siri is only present when Porsche feels alone, threatened, or sad. Since the music reinvigorates Porsche and she expresses emotion through the dance, Siri is not needed to provide that outlet. Porsche rediscovers that early connection to dance and music through which she feels most free. Though music is Porsche's therapy, helping Lana provides a purpose for Porsche. Just when she thinks her family is normalizing, Lana steals Porsche's belongings and devastates her. Porsche, at fourteen, is even more mentally exhausted and depressed as a result of Lana's abandonment.

Though Porsche continues to struggle with schizophrenia, Elisha, Porsche's first boyfriend and male admirer, becomes a beacon of hope. However, Porsche is not yet ready to invite a man into her heart or her body. Porsche maintains bodily agency because she is very protective over how she is touched and how she uses her body. Early in her narrative, she insists, "I hate anyone who thinks they can touch me without me wanting to be touched. Every time I

woke up in a hospital, I'd . . . place two fingers inside my vagina . . . and smell it . . . I know what rape is. Girls in the group home . . . whisper about it . . . I check after every doctor . . . make sure they wasn't poking around in my private parts . . . after they drugged me" (Souljah 89). Whatever traumatic experience Porsche encounters through foster care, she is hyperaware of her body. Though she does not quite have control over her emotional and mental state, she fights fiercely to protect herself from any unwanted attention and intrusion onto her person. Porsche's aversion to attention is more difficult in Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, Porsche's beauty is difficult to ignore. For example, she says, "People said I was beautiful, gorgeous, attractive . . . mysterious, elegant, exotic . . . None of those words moved me . . . I had never spread these pretty dancer's thighs for anyone . . . the more I ignored . . . the more they were interested" (Souljah 324). What Souljah does here is show the reader just how unlike Winter Porsche has become. Porsche is a very beautiful teenager who is not concerned about how the boys in the neighborhood are attracted to her physically. Unimpressed and uninterested in using her body or letting her men use her body, Porsche subverts this attention. This is also an indication of how different the environment influences the Santiago children. Porsche was ripped from the environment before she had the chance to grow up to be like Winter, flashy and always seeking the attention of men, for monetary gain. Instead, Porsche values her body and works hard to make money.

Souljah also understands that Porsche is a maturing, young woman who is also a sexual being. Owning that sexuality and deciding when to experience that sexuality is another way Porsche exhibits agency over her body. Porsche begins to feel sexually aroused around her boyfriend of a year, Elisha; Siri returns to warn Porsche against getting too close to a boy. Siri warns, "that's okay if you want to surrender to him. But, don't act like you can be around him without breaking your rules, 'No touching, no kissing, no giving your whole heart to him'"

(Souljah 328). Elisha is a threat to Siri's existence, although he has met both Siri and Porsche. Elisha is the first male figure since Ricky Santiago for whom Porsche even considers opening her heart. When she does finally surrender herself to him, it is on her terms, after she has had time to find a way to heal from the wounds of a broken family. Porsche, determined to be worthy of Elisha's love, takes her love of dance and makes a career out of it. Only after she has a successful career, and Elisha is given the opportunity to fulfill his dreams, does Porsche submit to Elisha, and becomes his wife the following day. Though it is never a question of whether or not Porsche loves Elisha, it is important for Porsche to put her mental health and her body first. She spends the majority of her life, post-incarceration, struggling to re-create a life with the Santiago family, namely Lana, which never comes to fruition. She does so at the expense of her health, mentally and emotionally. What Porsche maintains through all of this is her love of dance and her body. That is the last thing she controls and no one is successful in taking that from her. Through music and dance, Souljah gives Porsche a lifeline; dance and Hip Hop music save Porsche's life and provide the foundation for her new life with Elisha.

Conclusion

A Deeper Love Inside is Souljah's critique of a system in which young African American girls can be invisible. Her text is an important contribution to the African American literary tradition because it creates a dialogue that centers African American girlhood and African American lived experience in a Hip Hop generation. While Porsche's narrative is the sequel to Winter's narrative, Souljah broadens Hip Hop literature and creates a new way of engaging Hip Hop texts. This close reading provided a way of thinking critically about how incarceration affect African American girls in ways that are different from how African American men and boys face incarceration. While some of Porsche's experiences could be the experiences of young

boys as well, Souljah's decision to center Porsche's experience provides a diverse conversation that involves both women's and girls' issues and offers a critique of how societal circumstances affect families and communities. This critical reading offers up new possibilities when thinking about how Hip Hop literature adds to academic discourse.

Porsche is one girl who makes it out, but the things she has to experience while fighting for that freedom are killing a large majority of those whose lives mirror Porsche's. Though Porsche is no longer the invisible child, there are millions of other invisible girls of color who will not have a happy ending. Porsche's story is an ode to girls who feel invisible, in their families, in foster care, juvenile detention centers, and on the streets. Since Porsche's experiences are so pervasive in the larger Hip Hop culture, and are so relevant to many Hip Hop feminist critiques of systemic injustices, more critical attention to these works can provide artistic representation for issues that plague incarcerated women and girls. These stories matter and are as much a part of society and culture as traditional, canonical texts. Porsche shows the reader that there is a deeper love inside of her than society would have one believe about her and her family. Sister Souljah creates a space where that love has a place to blossom. Such is the case within Hip Hop Feminist literature; there is something deeper and more critical to Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop Feminist literature than what currently exists. Continued scholarly engagement with these texts will ensure that the genre continues to grow and narrate the lived experiences of girls and women of color.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

“THE WAY FORWARD”

“Hip-hop has done so much for racial relations, and I don’t think it’s given the proper credit. It has changed America immensely. I’m going to make a very bold statement: Hip-hop has done more than any leader, politician, or anyone to improve race relations.” — Jay Z

“Wherever I go, I bring the culture with me, so that they can understand that it’s attainable. I didn’t do it any other way than through hip-hop.” —Jay Z

Jay Z is speaking to the manner in which Hip Hop is a unifying tool for various ethnicities. In his reflections on Hip Hop’s contributions to cultural, racial, and social relations, Jay Z’s statements underscore how Hip Hop cultural productions, like art and music, are valuable tools for communicating across the lines of race and class. Hip Hop culture is appealing because it is current, attainable, and representative of a part of African American lived experience. Jay Z talks about Hip Hop as a bridge. This bridge connects people of various backgrounds, ethnicities, and economical situations; Hip Hop literature does something similar. Hip Hop narratives, with their taboo content and language, can also unite academic spaces and cultural ones. It is this idea that undergirds this project.

Initially, I set out to prove that Sister Souljah’s works should be brought into the African American literary canon. However, as I began the researching and writing phase it became evident that instead there was something more interesting happening in Hip Hop literature. Canonicity is not the goal of Hip Hop literature; Hip Hop literature, since 1999, already has been moving toward the center of its own critical space. Instead, a better approach to this project was

to highlight the ways in which street literature becomes Hip Hop literature while moving from the margins of academic discourse to the center of discourse. With more critical attention there emerges a clear blueprint for future expansion and academic engagement of Hip Hop literature. The way forward is showing how Souljah's work and similar works engage in cultural and critical conversations. Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* cements the Hip Hop literature genre; her sequel *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story* is representative of an emerging subgenre I call Hip Hop feminist literature.

My project shows that marginalized, urban texts have a place at the center of critical conversations. It is important to engage these texts in this way because it is necessary to ensure that African American literature continues to expand and include contemporary representations of the culture. It is also beneficial to academia to locate texts that center the voices and narratives of African American girls and women as a way of having narratives that reflect African American, female lived experience. Additionally, it is important to locate a tangible collection of Hip Hop literature and feminist readings of Hip Hop literature that inform the literature critically and could be used as a lens to read it. This is especially important because of a need to show both the critical and cultural relevance of Hip Hop literature and how it can be a part of academic discourse. The result of this project is a two-part, intertextual study of traditional African American literature and Hip Hop literature.

The first part examines the varying ways street literature can be included in academic discourse. Placing texts like Youngblood's *Black Girl in Paris* alongside mainstays in the African American literary tradition like Petry's *The Street* broadens the kinds of critical spaces open to contemporary writers. It also examines how some contemporary writers like Sapphire extend existing models to create current narratives from the Hip Hop generation. Sapphire's

work is indicative of renewed conversations of older, predecessor texts while looking toward the future of the African American literary tradition and the rapid growth of Hip Hop Literature. The second part of this project serves as a blueprint for how all of these texts are in conversation with one another. Instead of pushing Hip Hop literature to the margins of academic discourse, this project presents a functional how-to-guide on how to utilize Hip Hop literature alongside other works. With an eye toward new directions in this vastly expanding genre, the question worth asking is: What now in the field of Black feminism, Hip Hop Feminism, and Hip Hop literature?

In this project, I locate a new genre of Hip Hop literature: Hip Hop feminism. Identifying this new genre of literature is the first step toward more critical engagement with Hip Hop feminism; there can be a practical application for critical engagement in academia and in Hip Hop culture. In “The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper, and Susana Morris examine the ways Hip Hop feminism shapes the future of Hip Hop culture, and they identify Hip Hop feminism as a platform for other art forms. One of the most important things this project does is point to a new way of thinking about how to employ Hip Hop feminism within a literary context. Cultural critics and Hip Hop feminists, like Durham, Cooper, and Morris, have already begun to do this type of scholarly linking of Hip Hop feminism to literary analyses. When it comes to the literature that African American literature surveys cover, there is a need for diverse literature that is representative of both the period and the culture out of which it emerges. Diversity is important when deciding which texts to include in African American literature surveys. That same diversity opens up various lenses through which we can then critically engage texts in literature and in Hip Hop cultural critique.

Currently, educators in the field of African American literature, in the late 20th and early 21st century, are met with the burdensome task of teaching a survey of literature that spans some

300 years, in one or two semesters. In a typical survey course, the canonical texts include slave narratives from Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson; Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*; James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; and, if one is lucky, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, or another Morrison text. Not only is this not feasible it also does not allow any room for the inclusion of contemporary writers of street literature and Hip Hop literature. The contemporary sections of typical African American literature anthologies consider literature since 1975 a singular unit. In this project, I show that Hip Hop literature emerges out of this period and is heading into its own tradition. The way forward is to bridge the gap between the critical aspects of Hip Hop culture (Hip Hop feminism and critical iterations of protest movements) and how these critical approaches can be coupled with literary forms in the classroom.

Since I have shown that there are texts about Hip Hop culture on the periphery of academic engagement, this project also acts as a guide on how to incorporate these texts into the classroom. The logical next step with this research is to continue to put it into practice. While working on the proposal for this project, I decided to approach my African American literature survey as a "past to present" course. I began with slave narratives, then progressively worked toward this idea of "present" in African American literature. Each semester, depending on the latest events in Hip Hop, "present" was something different. For example, at the end of the first semester, the class ended with Hip Hop literature and Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*. The students found the addition of this novel both challenging and exciting. Many of them had read the text for pleasure, yet they never considered how it functioned through a critical lens or

as a key text for Hip Hop literature. This is a concept I want to continue exploring in future courses. During the course of the semester, there was a surge in media coverage of police brutality against African Americans and protest movements, which spread across all social media platforms. As a result, “present” shifted to accounts of police brutality, unsuccessful indictments of white police officers, and the affect these things had on African Americans; there was even a screening of the film *Fruitvale Station*.⁶¹ In this course, “present” was no longer Sister Souljah’s text; although Hip Hop literature was the most present period in the class, the literature was still behind the latest social and cultural movement. This prompted me to bring the course current, again. With a lack of current literature, this is increasingly challenging. The solution is to seek novels, blogs, book length narratives, and think pieces about popular culture; exploring how these pieces of literature add to the trajectory of Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop culture will only prove beneficial to the overall growth of the genre. This project is just a starting point for the future of Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop Feminist literature.

Hip Hop feminist literary and cultural criticism bridges the gap between Black feminism and literary studies; the result is a location of a collection of Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop feminist literature. *The Crunk Feminist Collective* is one such medium through which a group of Hip Hop feminists advocate for social change in the world with a critical eye toward women’s issues and voices. *The Crunk Feminist Collective* leads social media blogs in its attention to advocating for the voices of the voiceless. They demand that academia have a political and ethical commitment, theoretically, to the lives of African American women and girls in and of the Hip Hop generation. Crunk Feminists also use Hip Hop feminism as a lens to critique all art

⁶¹ *Fruitvale Station* chronicles the last day of Oscar Grant’s life. Shortly after midnight, New Year’s Day 2009, BART officers shot Oscar Grant at a transit station in San Francisco. His death sparked national attention and protests of policing tactics in the US.

forms; this includes literature. This means there can be critical engagement with texts like Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*.

Although Hip Hop feminists like Joan Morgan and Tricia Rose use Hip Hop feminism as a framework, they are using it in other fields. If Hip Hop feminism can encompass the needs of women of color around the world, on and off social media, in the Hip Hop generation, then the literature of the Hip Hop generation can be a tool for navigating critically these texts.

The next step is to ensure that the literature born out of these cultural moments fully captures these stories, so that they are intertwined in the larger trajectory of African American literature. When thinking about the purpose of this literature, I recall Kenneth Warren and his iteration that the impetus behind African American literature had long been the Civil Rights Movement.⁶² Although I agree that once America was past that movement, that particular impetus fell away, it is also true that America is currently seeing contemporary stimuli which require different kinds of literature and literary scholarship to articulate their importance. For example, bloggers, cultural critics, and scholars make daily strides towards cementing the voices of women of color in America through social media. Women and girls like Rachel Jentel,⁶³

⁶² Here, I am referring to Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature*. Warren argues, "African American literature is not a trans historical entity within which the kinds of changes described here have occurred but that African American literature itself constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of literary practice that was responsive to conditions that by and large no longer obtain" (8). My point here is that the purpose of this new literature is to showcase that there is a new impetus for a new genre of writing and theorizing about black lived experience.

⁶³ Best friend of Trayvon Martin and the last person to speak with him, Rachel was mocked for her speech while testifying during George Zimmerman's murder trial. Her testimony was largely disregarded because of her appearance and her accented speech. Black women rallied around her, calling media out for its blatant and racist media portrayal of her accounts.

Quvenzhané Wallis,⁶⁴ and Renisha McBride⁶⁵ have been the center of social media moments because the Hip Hop generation is also the most technologically involved generation. A contributing writer to “The Feminist Wire,” Sikivu Hutchinson describes the importance of understanding McBride’s murder for its larger implications for African American women and other women of color. Hutchinson contends,

McBride’s murder underscores how gender, race, and segregation intersect in the everyday experiences of black women as policed female bodies. Black women, unlike white women, do not have the social privilege and advantage of the dominant culture’s belief in their feminine ‘innocence,’ ‘fragility,’ gentility, or right to be protected from men of another race. But in the justifiable national focus on the criminalization of black men, black women’s daily criminalization—on the highway, in stores, in schools and in the workplace—is minimized. (Hutchinson)

This way of analyzing the murder of a brown-skinned woman is an opportunity for the social and cultural commentary to meet with the literary in an effort to write these cultural and historical moments into emerging literature. Now, there are new impetuses propelling a renaissance of protestation. As a result, Hip Hop literature is increasingly becoming more social media focused. The events plaguing under-represented communities are of grave concern now more than ever.

While authors are still creating stories based on these experiences, there are other mediums of publication that stand in for traditionally held forms of literature. For example, since August 2014, the United States has experienced a surge in police killings of men and women of color at unprecedented rates. Ferguson, Missouri found itself in the middle of social activism rejuvenation; this movement spread to other cities, and found a unifying home in the

⁶⁴ The Onion’s twitter feed posted a tweet that said “Everyone else seems afraid to say it, but that Quvenzhané Wallis is kind of a c—t, right? #Oscars2013. During the 2013 Oscars, Comedian Seth McFarlane commented, “so let me just address those of you up for an award, so you go nominated for an Oscar, something a 9-year old could do! She’s adorable, Quvenzhané. She said to me backstage, “I really hope I don’t lose to that old lady, Jennifer Lawrence.” To give you an idea how young she is it’ll be 16 years before she’s too old for Clooney (George Clooney is famous for dating very young, white women models and Hollywood actresses).” Tricia Romano, *The Daily Beast*, “The Onion Tweets” (25 Feb 2013).

⁶⁵ Renisha McBride was an unarmed, black, high school student who was shot in the face by a white man.

#BlackLivesMatter hash tag. In order to keep the literature current, with an eye toward authenticity and accurate representations of issues plaguing poor communities, it is imperative that authors who narrate these experiences not be discounted. They are the future of Hip Hop culture that will narrate these times for future generations.⁶⁶ While there have not yet been any fictitious representations of these millennial movements, there is a shift toward incorporating these themes and cultural issues into academic spaces. For example, Kris Kleindienst and Jarek Steele, owners of Left Back Books in St. Louis, put together a list of books with the sole purpose of educating the people of St. Louis about the “academic and emotional realities of events unfolding in Ferguson. Some of the books offered statistics, some offered stories” (Mumford 1). Their list includes Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), and it also features traditional African American literature representations like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). Tellingly, this list also includes street literature with Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster* (1999). This list uses critical framings of race relations in America and abroad as a way of understanding the racial, social, and political climate in Ferguson and similar places, while also including a diverse collection of novels that expound on these issues across several literary periods. Kleindienst’s and Steele’s list points to ways of uniting literature, criticism, plays, and other creative forms at the center of critical conversation because it is beneficial to a large group

⁶⁶ At the time of this project, there have been some self-published works that incorporate the Black Lives Matter Movement. Some of those texts include: Thomas Jerome Baker’s *Black Lives Matter: From Holocaust to Lynching to Liberation* (2015), Verne Johnson’s *Black Lives Matter: A Country Still Divided* (2015), Moya Ojarigi’s *Black Lives Matter: Teach Your Child to Overcome the Challenges of Race* (2015), and Jamala Rogers’ *Ferguson is America: Roots of Rebellion* (2015). These texts are just a snapshot of the growing scholarship. This scholarship addresses America’s policing problems while also addressing millennial protest movements including the Black Lives Matter movement and its impact inside and outside of academic spaces. Steven A. Butler, Jr. and Courtney Baker Oliver created a play, *Black Lives Matter!* that sees this movement take center stage. This shows that artistic representations of the movement exist. Perhaps literary representations are next.

of people. For Kleindienst and Steele, the people who would most benefit are in the local community.

Finally, this project began because of labels (ethnic, urban, fiction, etc.) separating African American authors from other authors. Initially, I did not understand the need for separation. Now, as I reflect on the work, I realize that labels sometimes do the work of distinguishing genres; labels can also carry stigmas that prevent them from being included in academic discourses. I view this project as the beginning of an in-depth literary study that can serve as a blueprint for engaging critically Hip Hop literature. Instead of fighting to eradicate labels like “urban” “street” and “ethnic,” it is more important to examine the collective body of works that fall into these categories, then evaluate the similarities between these works and traditional African American literature. Hip Hop literature has already branched out into Hip Hop Feminist literature. As I transition to the next phase of research, there are several ways I see this project expanding into other areas.

First, Souljah has already produced Hip Hop Literature with *The Coldest Winter Ever*; she has produced Hip Hop Feminist literature with *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*. Although the second part of this project evolved into a study on Sister Souljah, it was necessary to omit both Omar Tyree’s *Flyy Girl* and Sister Souljah’s *Midnight* series from this project. As I look toward extending this research, it is imperative that I explore the ways in which Tyree’s *Flyy Girl* contributes to Hip Hop literature from a male perspective and how Souljah formulates her ideal model of manhood in the Hip Hop generation with her *Midnight* series. *Flyy Girl* was my first encounter with street literature. As I consider how street literature, and eventually Hip Hop literature, contributes to an ever-expanding literary tradition, it is vital

that I study how Tyree articulates African American, female lived experience, especially since his text pre-dates Souljah's text.

Second, Souljah's texts are increasingly popular in prisons because of how she employs prison thematically. In that regard, Souljah is not the only contemporary author who incorporates prison life into her narratives. Perhaps prison literature is also an extension of Hip Hop literature. I am deeply interested in other Hip Hop literatures that do similar work with thematic uses of prison and how incarceration affects the African American community and other under-represented groups.

Third, although this project focuses on African American, female authors, there are other minorities introduced in the examples of street literature and Hip Hop literature I examine. For example, *PUSH* incorporates the narratives of Latina women who face similar abuse and socio-economic status. Similarly, *A Deeper Love Inside* sees Porsche Santiaga forming communities in juvenile detention with Latina, Asian, and African American women. The incorporation of other minorities into these novels shows that perhaps Hispanic literature of the Hip Hop era is possible; I want to seek out those texts and read them as extensions of Hip Hop literature.

Last, the inclusion of other minorities points to diverse experiences within Hip Hop culture. Under-represented groups expand to include other races, so they can also be categorized as extensions of Hip Hop literature and Hip Hop Feminist literature. One can only conclude that canonicity is not the goal for Hip Hop literature. If Souljah's works are any indication of the potential for growth and expansion, then Hip Hop literature sits at the center of a growing conversation and tradition of Hip Hop literature. Hip Hop Feminist literature is proof that this tradition is rapidly expanding to include other voices, experiences, and identities. As Jay Z says, "Identity is a prison you can never escape, but the way to redeem your past is not to run from it,

but to try to understand it, and use it as a foundation to grow.” This project reveals that diverse voices and identities provide readers with a foundation for the continued growth of Hip Hop literature. This new genre needs more texts with which to engage. This project is just the blueprint.

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